

354th Fighter Group

William N Hess



WILLIAM N 'BILL' HESS is a veteran of nearly seven years' service in the US Army Air Force and US Air Force. He flew as an aerial gunner in B-17s with the Fifteenth Air Force and chalked up 16 missions before his aircraft fell to enemy flak. He spent the rest of the war as a German PoW.

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354th Fighter Group

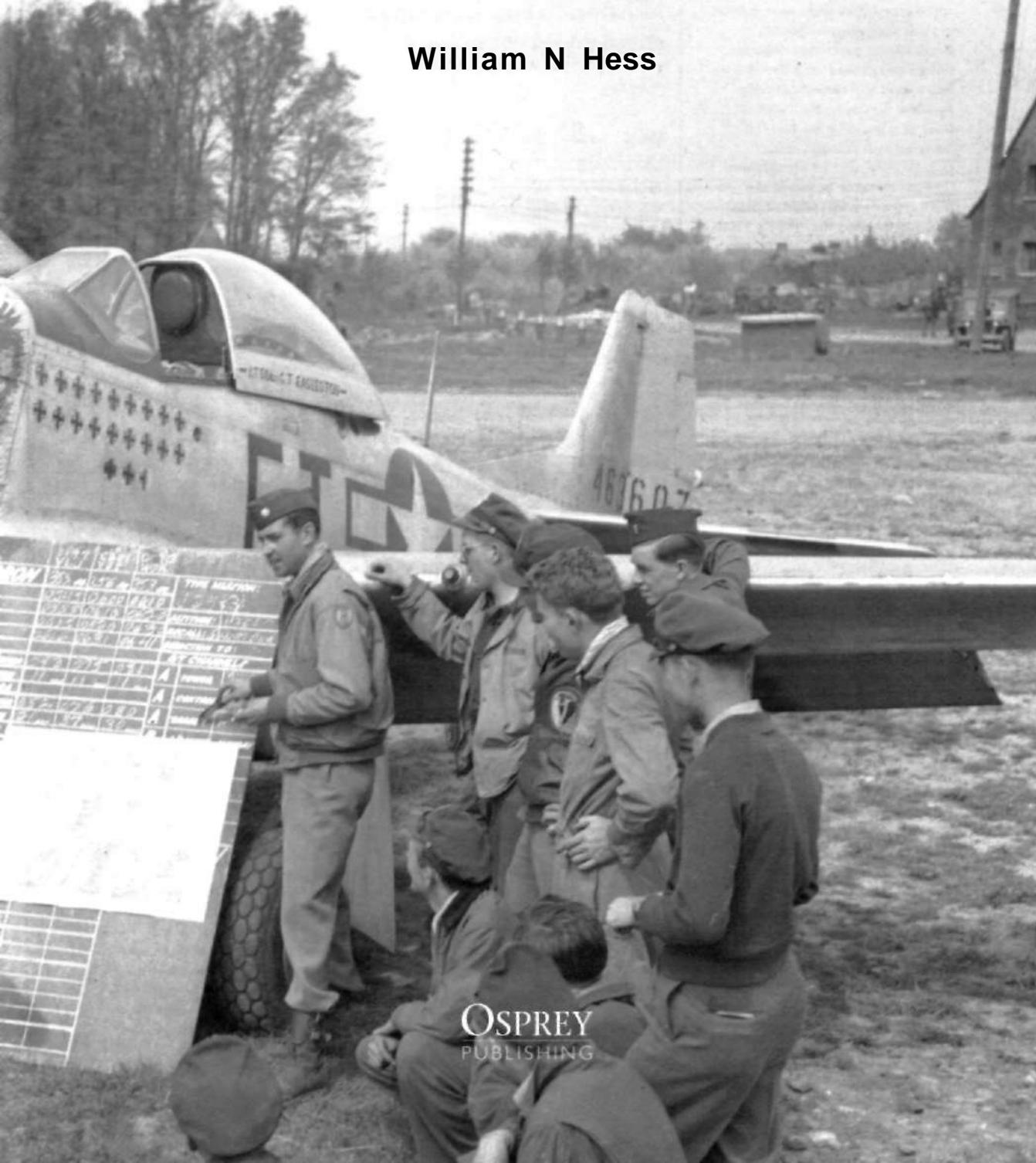


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On 3 March 1944, the heavy bomb groups of the Eighth Air Force briefed to strike at Berlin for the very first time. One of the fighter groups charged with escorting the 'heavies' on this historic raid was the 354th FG, known as the 'Pioneer Mustang Group'. As it transpired, the weather over the German capital was terrible, and the bombers were sent instead to their secondary target of Oranienburg, just north of Berlin. Conditions proved little better here either, and most bombers were recalled. However, the 354th FG headed north with the handful of 'heavies' that pressed on to Oranienburg, and whilst climbing through cloud to 42,000 ft, the Mustang pilots lost sight of their charges. Leading the group's 356th FS on this day was squadron CO (and newly-crowned ace), Capt Richard E Turner. He was flying his personal P-51B-1 (43-12434), nicknamed *SHORT-FUSE SALLEE*.

Just as contact with the bombers was lost, the 354th spotted 15 to 30 contrails at one o'clock high - these were soon identified as bandits. The German fighters (Bf 109Gs) dived down to engage the P-51s, and Capt Turner instructed his squadron to prepare to counter the enemy attack:

'I ordered the unit to drop tanks and break to the right, and started to haul in on the stick. At this moment my engine quit cold! My blood chilled and I slumped down in the cockpit to grab my fuel switch, knowing instantly that I had forgotten to switch from drop tanks to internal fuel before releasing. After four or five seconds the engine restarted, and I nosed down to gain flying speed again. I then looked to the rear - straight into the guns of four '109s coming down fast on my tail! I was cold meat! At minimum flying speed with no flight to help, I couldn't think of what to do. Some subconscious instinct must have moved my hand to the flap lever handle. As the flaps hit the slipstream, the Mustang almost hung in mid-air, full power keeping it from spinning. The '109s flashed by me without scoring a hit from their firing guns. As they passed I pulled up the flaps and dove after them, increasing my speed, and chances to live. I knew that to have any chance at all I had to get rid of them in a hurry, and concentrating on the

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fighter immediately in front of me, I hit him with a long hard burst of "fifties" from dead astern. He took a flash of hits about the cockpit and at the wing root, which exploded his ammo and snapped off his left wing. The canopy and pilot followed the wing in short order.'

A second Bf 109 had by then latched onto Capt Turner's tail, and was closing in on the hapless Mustang ace.

'As I waited for the sight of those blinking gun muzzle flashes the suspense was terrific. He seemed to fall back a little, and hesitantly bob his left wing slightly as if he was undecided about whether to attack. Puzzled, I took a quick glance around and saw the most beautiful sight in the world. Two Mustangs were rushing toward me from eleven o'clock high. No wonder the '109 was hanging back!'

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GENESIS

The 354th Fighter Group (FG) was one of a number of new groups that were formed to reinforce the US Army Air Force, and enable it to fight in a myriad of combat theatres during the early days of World War 2. The 354th was formed at Hamilton Field, California, on 15 November 1942. Its initial commander was Maj Kenneth Martin, a softly spoken pilot from Missouri, whose intensity saw that the group got off to a good start, which in turn held it in good stead when it came time for the unit to enter combat. The squadrons of the 354th were the 353rd, 355th and 356th FSs.

Martin selected his new squadron commanders carefully. The 356th FS was headed by Capt Charles Johnson, who had already seen combat in the Philippines and during the defence of Port Moresby, in New Guinea, where he had been wounded in action. His unit was duly nicknamed the 'Red Ass' squadron, and its insignia took the form of a bucking red donkey. This sobriquet would later prove most apt, for pilots in the European Theatre of Operations (ETO) routinely suffered from 'red asses' following hours sat on rock hard parachute packs (enhanced by a deflated rubber dinghy) in their P-51s whilst performing long range escort missions!

The 355th FS was headed by Capt George Bickell, who had ventured to the Pacific in June 1942 and had flown a Curtiss P-40 off the US Navy aircraft carrier USS *Saratoga* when his 73rd FS was assigned to the island of Midway to compensate for the loss of the fighters in the battle that had taken place there a few days earlier. Having seen the destruction at Midway and Pearl Harbor at first hand, Bickell was champing at the bit to see combat action.

His 355th FS became the 'Pugnacious Pups', as depicted by the invulnerable bulldog on its insignia.

Finally, the CO of the 353rd FS was Maj Owen Seaman, whose squadron adopted the nickname the 'Flying Cobras', depicted by a coiled, ready to strike Asian reptile. Little did the initial members of the squadron imagine how lethal their unit would become.

On 18 January 1943, the newly-formed 354th FG found itself on its way to Tonopah, Nevada. It had been thought that the new base would be complete by the time the group arrived, but all that was present were the windswept runways. Tents were soon erected and new pilots began to turn up, most of whom were fresh out of flying school at Luke Field, Arizona, where they had graduated on North American AT-6 Texan advanced trainers.

The 354th FG's initial equipment consisted of the Bell P-39N Airacobra, which was a 'hot ship' for green pilots fresh out of training school. Possessing a top speed of over 330 mph, and blessed with a high degree of manoeuvrability, the Bell fighter's primary oddity was the fact that the engine was mounted to the rear of the pilot, with the propeller shaft passing forward under the cockpit.

The fighter had been bought by the Army Air Force without the supercharger recommended by the manufacturer, resulting in the P-39's

Col Kenneth R Martin, Commanding Officer of the 354th FG from its formation until his mid-air collision with a Bf 109G over Frankfurt in P-51B-5 43-6359 on 11 February 1944. By then a five-kill ace (he had claimed his all important fifth victory just minutes prior to the collision), Martin spent the rest of the war as a PoW (USAAF)





355th FS P-39Ns are seen on a rainy ramp in Portland, Oregon, in the late summer of 1943. Note that each aircraft boasts a 'Pugnacious Pup' emblem on its 'car door' cockpit entry hatch. 354th pilots racked up a lot of flying time in the P-39 during the first year of the group's existence, although few of them actually liked the Bell fighter (USAAF)

performance drastically tailing off at ceilings in excess of 12,000 ft. This in turn made the aircraft unsuitable for air-to-air combat, hence its allocation to newly-formed stateside fighter groups such as the 354th FG.

Aside from its poor altitude performance, the P-39 had also developed a reputation for being tricky to handle in the air. Indeed, if not flown with due care whilst manoeuvring hard (during a dogfight, for example), it had a way of putting a pilot into a flat spin from which most did not recover. Unfortunately this was the fate that befell one of the 354th's

young pilots during the group's first days of training. This problem also cost the outfit one of its original squadron COs when, on 6 February 1943, Capt Charles Johnson took off in a newly-delivered P-39 and got himself into a flat spin from which he did not recover. He was replaced as CO of the 356th FS by Capt Richard Neece.

Maj Kenneth Martin almost fell victim to the P-39's spinning characteristics as well, although he was skilled enough to discover a technique for recovering the aircraft. Having taken the Airacobra up to 19,000 ft to perform some aggressive manoeuvring, he blacked out when his oxygen system failed. When he regained consciousness at 5000 ft, Martin found himself in a flat spin. Struggling to recover, he tried various methods with no result until he shoved the stick fully forward and kicked hard opposite rudder. The aircraft pulled out of its dive.

In late February 1943 the 353rd and 356th FSs, along with Group Headquarters, moved to Santa Rosa, California - the 355th FS went to Hayward, California. Training continued, with some air-to-air gunnery sorties being flown against tow targets during the period. However, there was so much rain and fog in Santa Rosa that training was hampered.

Capt Neece departed the 356th FS in May of 1943, and he was replaced by Maj James H Howard, a former US Navy fighter pilot who had resigned his commission in June 1941 in order to fly with the American Volunteer Group (AVG). Howard was the veteran of extensive combat against the Japanese over China and Burma, and had been credited with 2.333 aerial victories and four strafing kills flying P-40C/Es. His pilots found him to be quite a task master, but they were truly inspired by his teaching, as recounted here by future ace Richard E Turner in his autobiography, *Mustang Pilot*:

'The assumption of command by Howard gave the squadron a tremendous boost. The enthusiasm and eagerness kindled under Johnson burned brightly again, for here was a commander whose skill was legendary, and whose superior leadership was soon amply demonstrated. Howard initiated a programme of training in mutual support tactics as practiced and proven in combat by the Flying Tigers in China. His insistence upon perfection resulted in an aggressive, well-tempered fighting squadron, finely tuned to the anticipated conditions of actual combat.'



This night time shot shows a hardworking 355th FS groundcrewman running up the Allison V-1710 engine in his P-39N at Portland in September 1943. Night flying was a rare event for the 354th FG, so it is probably safe to assume that the airman is performing an engine test after carrying out routine servicing (USAAF)

The 353rd FS moved to Portland, Oregon, in May 1943, and it was followed there by the 355th FS the following month. June also brought a movement by the 356th FS, which now found itself based in Salem, Oregon. From this time forward the pilots of the 354th FG filled their time with formation flying, and learning gunnery, dive-bombing, skip-bombing and strafing tactics. Men were lost in flying accidents during this period, but with the torrid

pace of their training such fatalities were inevitable. Pilots were not only becoming honed for the job that lay ahead, they were also building up flying time which would duly stand them in good stead during the many combat missions that would follow.

By September the group was beginning to undergo inspections to determine its degree of readiness, and in early October orders were received at group HQ instructing the 354th to head for Camp Kilmer, in New Jersey. Trains were duly boarded by group personnel on the 6th, bound for the east coast. The journey to England had begun at last.

MUSTANGS!

On the morning of 21 October 1943, the men of the 354th FG departed the USA aboard the British army transport *HMS Athlone Castle*. Later that day the vessel joined a convoy for the trip to England. The journey was memorable only for its inconveniences and boredom, with lots of gambling and poor food being the memories of note for most of the pilots during the 12-day passage. And following the ship's arrival at Liverpool, disembarkation was delayed for three days due to heavy fog.

Early on 4 November the men boarded a train for Greenham Common, in Berkshire. There they viewed hardstands, taxiways and two 6000-ft runways, but no aircraft. On the way over there had been much speculation as to what aircraft the men would fly on their arrival. Most felt that in view of what was already being utilised, they would probably be outfitted with Republic P-47 Thunderbolts. Others felt that they might get Lockheed P-38 Lightnings. Summing up the feeling of most pilots in the 354th at this stage in the war, Richard Turner remembers that 'our eagerness to get a piece of the action was such by now that we would have been happy to take our old beat up P-39s into the middle of hell!'

Unbeknown to the men of the 354th, their dilemma was being solved at the very highest levels of the Army Air Force during their voyage.

A new version of the North American P-51 Mustang had just entered production, and the initial aircraft were destined for England. The new P-51B was fitted with the Packard-built Rolls-Royce Merlin 61 engine, which was not a 'gas guzzler' and provided the aircraft with a very long range. Not only that, it was fitted with a two-stage, high altitude supercharger which gave it the capability to fly as far as any American heavy bomber then in service, and to engage the Luftwaffe's best fighters at the higher ceilings favoured by the enemy.

The shortcomings of the P-51A with its original Allison engine had relegated the aircraft to low altitude, tactical work, and it was already being utilised by two tactical reconnaissance units in the Eighth Air Force. For this reason new Mustangs destined for England were intended for the Ninth Tactical Air Force. However, when Gen H H 'Hap' Arnold, Chief of the Army Air Forces, was told of the capabilities of the new P-51B by the commander of VIII Fighter Command, Maj Gen William Kepner, he decided that this was the aircraft needed by the Eighth Air Force for use as a long-range escort for his beleaguered bombers.

Gen Ira Eaker then worked out a plan whereby the Merlin Mustangs would be assigned to the Ninth Air Force for administration, but operationally they would be assigned to his Eighth Air Force. Thus, the 354th was the first unit in England to operate the P-51B, and it would remain under Eighth Air Force control operationally until its transfer to the Ninth Air Force became a tactical necessity following the D-Day landings.

Gen Elwood 'Pete' Quesada, who had been appointed Commander of IX Fighter Command, immediately turned his attention to the arrival and equipment of the 354th FG. There was one firm commitment that had to be determined. Quesada asked Lt Col Martin how long it would take him to have his unit ready for ops. Martin replied, 'Two weeks'. The 354th would have only until 1 December 1943 to attain combat readiness.

When this was announced to the pilots of the 354th they were ecstatic. Here was a brand new fighter that could do 440 mph at 30,000 ft, could manoeuvre with anything in the air and had the range to go anywhere the bombers could go. Transition began immediately, but the only aircraft the group had to start out on were a handful of old P-51 As loaned from the tactical reconnaissance units. Finally, on 11 November, five new aircraft were received, and two days later the group moved to Boxted, on the Essex/Suffolk border. Here, the men found a typical British base with runways, taxyways, hardstands and a hangar. Engineering and operations buildings, as well as mess and housing units took the form of Nissen huts. The 354th would stay here until 17 April 1944.

The new Mustangs came in slowly and the pilots and groundcrews busied themselves getting the aircraft checked out, and working on any problems that arose. The few technical hitches that were found in the P-51B had to be eradicated before the aircraft could be declared combat ready. There were no technical manuals available at the time, so things had to be worked out by trial and error. One immediate problem centred on the fact that the nuts and bolts within the Merlin engine were metric, which meant that the wrenches and sockets brought over from America by the groundcrews did not fit! Tools were quickly sourced from the RAF.

Only 24 combat ready P-51Bs had arrived by the last day of November, when Gen Lewis Brereton, Commander of the Ninth Air Force, visited Boxted. On his departure it was announced that the 354th FG would fly its first mission the following day.

Amongst the very first batch of 400 B-model Mustangs constructed by North American, this machine was issued to the 353rd FS in England in early November 1943. 'FT' was the 'buzz code' allocated to all 353rd FS machines (USAAF)



INTO THE ARENA

The initial missions of the 354th FG were led by Lt Col Donald Blakeslee, a veteran combat pilot and ace from the 4th FG. He had started out with the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), then transferred to the Royal Air Force (RAF) before joining one of the American 'Eagle' squadrons prior to their induction into the US Army Air Force in September 1942. Mission No 1 was flown on 1 December 1943.

Blakeslee's briefing covered the vital points to be instilled in the pilots before they ventured over enemy territory for the first time. Also discussed were some of the basic rules relating to air-to-air combat should the Luftwaffe be encountered. One of those most emphasised by Blakeslee was the head on pass. The veteran Spitfire and Thunderbolt pilot told the novices that never under any conditions did an American pilot break during the closure between the two aircraft. One of the listeners asked the question 'What do you do if the enemy pilot doesn't break?' Blakeslee replied curtly, 'Son, you will just have earned your flight pay the hard way'.

Shortly thereafter 24 Mustangs, led by Blakeslee, with Lt Col Martin on his wing, took off. As they climbed to altitude through heavy cloud the aeroplanes headed for Belgium and the Pas de Calais area in France. After only an hour and twenty minutes aloft, the Mustangs were back on the ground. Only one thing marred the first mission - some flak holes suffered by one of the P-51s.

Mission No 2 did not take place until 5 December, when 36 Mustangs (along with 34 P-38s and no fewer than 266 P-47s) flew their first bomber support mission escorting 452 B-17s and 96 B-24s to the Amiens area of

'GQ-G', laden with 75-gallon drop tanks, is seen at a misty Boxed in December 1943. This aircraft was one of the first P-51B-1s assigned to the 355th FS. Note how the stencil marks on the individual letter 'G' have been touched out by the groundcrew (USAAF)





One of the earliest scorers and most aggressive pilots in the 354th FG was 1Lt Charles 'Chuck' Gumm Jr of the 355th FS. He scored six kills, 2.5 probably destroyed and eight damaged between 16 December 1943 and 25 February 1944 (USAAF)

rear gunner returned the P-51 pilot's fire. The second pass silenced the gunner as strikes were made on the fuselage. Pass number three set the right engine afire with parts flying off. On the final pass from dead astern Eagleston's guns jammed - a common problem with the B-model Mustang. The Bf 110 was last seen in a shallow glide with the engine still burning as it entered the undercast. Eagleston had to settle for a probably destroyed. There was one loss on the mission, when Lt Buford Eaves failed to return. He was later reported as a Prisoner of War (PoW).

Lt Col Blakeslee was leading the group again on 16 December, with 39 Mustangs helping to provide penetration support for 631 bombers attacking the German city of Bremen. This time the 354th scored its first confirmed victory when Lt Charles F Gumm sighted Bf 109s queuing up to the rear of some Fortresses. He later reported;

Lt Talbot and I climbed after them, and when within 400 yards range two of the enemy aircraft saw us and broke left and straight down. We closed on the other two and I dropped back a little to cover Lt Talbot's tail, but the enemy saw him and broke left and down. By then I was almost in a position to fire on my '109, which was still flying straight for the bombers. Lt Talbot pulled up and to the right to cover my tail while I closed to about 100 yards and fired a two-second burst, noticing no effects. I then closed to about 59 yards and fired a three-second burst, noticing a thin trail of smoke coming from the right side of the engine.

France. Weather prevented the bulk of the bombers from reaching their target, and there were no casualties amongst the 354th FG.

Mission No 3 (on 11 December) saw 44 P-51s winging their way over Germany for the first time, escorting 583 bombers to Emden. All went well until Lt Norman Hall of the 353rd FS was spotted spiralling down into the undercast during the return leg. No word from him was ever heard.

On 13 December the 'Pioneer Mustang Group', as the 354th now called itself, sortied 41 P-51Bs to the German port of Kiel to 'ride herd' on 710 'big friends'. As the group headed home Lt Glenn T Eagleston, who was flying mutual support with Lt Wallace Emmer, sighted a Messerschmitt Bf 110 about 3000 ft below and off to starboard. Eagleston peeled off and made four passes at the twin-engined fighter. His first pass was from 90 degrees, closing to dead astern. No results were observed, and the enemy fighter went into a tight 360-degree turn slightly down as the



Capt Robert Priser (left), second CO of the 353rd FS, shares a joke with his counterpart at the 355th FS, Capt George Bickell, during a press day at Boxted in late 1943. A veteran of frontline service with the RCAF and RAF (note his RAF 'wings' above his right breast pocket), Priser's time as CO of the 'Flying Cobras' would last just 29 days, for on 24 January 1944 he and Capt Joseph Giltner (CO of the 357th FG's 363rd FS) were bounced near Brussels by four 'white-nosed' Fw 190s and shot down. Giltner was one of a number of senior pilots from the newly-arrived 357th FG assigned to the 354th FG to gain combat experience. The attack by the Fw 190s was 'apparently well planned, as they appeared suddenly and disappeared as rapidly' into the undercast from whence they had come according to eyewitness, Capt James Cannon. Both Giltner and Priser took to their parachutes, with the former becoming a PoW and the latter successfully evading capture and returning to the UK, although he never again flew operationally in the ETO (USAAF)

I fired again at very close range and was showered with smoke and oil and pieces which I pulled up through and glanced back to see the fighter going down to the left with a large plume of smoke coming from the right side of the engine. Then I looked for Lt Talbot again, and saw him chasing an Fw 190, with another '190 closing on him. I went down after the latter fighter and they both broke straight down and away, so we went back to the bombers.'

Lt Col Martin led the next mission to be flown by the 354th FG, on 20 December, which saw the group head for Bremen and Wilhelmshaven once again. This time the fighter force ran into heavy opposition as the Luftwaffe sortied all manner of aircraft in an attempt to repel the 546-strong bomber force. Maj Jim Howard spotted three Bf 109s off to one side of the formation, making passes at the bombers. One attacked from the port side and then pulled up

under a B-17, presenting Howard with the opportunity to close in on the German fighter from about four o'clock. Whilst still out of range he fired a burst to scare his opponent, and then closed on him as the Bf 109 pilot tried to position himself for another attack.

Shoving the throttle fully forward, Howard rapidly closed from dead astern, and a two-second burst from his four 0.50-cal Brownings struck the Messerschmitt, which began to emit heavy black smoke. Lt H B Smith, Howard's wingman, reported seeing pieces fly off the Bf 109 before it exploded and fell away in an uncontrollable vertical dive.

Three other Bf 109s were destroyed during the course of the mission, including one claimed by Lt Col Blakeslee. However, the 354th had in turn lost three pilots, including the CO of the 353rd FS, Maj Owen Seaman. A veteran of combat in the Pacific, Seaman had been forced to ditch his Mustang in the North Sea after it had suffered engine failure. He was never seen again after his fighter hit the water. Capt Robert Priser, an ex-RCAF and RAF pilot, replaced Seaman as CO of the 353rd FS.

The next action of note for the group took place on a mission to Ludwigshafen on 30 December when scattered enemy opposition was encountered. The interception of these fighters did not go as well as planned, however, and the Mustang pilots were only able to claim a single Dornier Do 217 destroyed - the credit for the bomber's destruction was shared between four pilots. In return two pilots were lost when Lt Hays Appell of the 356th FS and Lt Bill Turner of the 355th collided over Germany. Parachutes were sighted coming from both aircraft and the pilots were duly taken prisoner.

The 354th closed out the year by escorting bombers returning from targets in France on the 31st. Upon arriving over enemy territory, the P-51 pilots spotted a straggling B-17 that was coming under attack from three Bf 109s. The group's leading flight quickly closed on the enemy and two fighters were downed, with Lt Col Martin sharing in one of the victories.

THE MUSTANGS GALLOP

There were important changes made in the high command of the Eighth Air Force in early January 1944, and these drastically altered the role of the escorting fighter groups. With the invasion of France an objective for the new year, it was mandatory that the Allies gain air superiority before the assault on 'Fortress Europe' could be successfully consummated. When Gen Dwight Eisenhower was chosen to head up the supreme command overseeing the invasion forces, he picked his own commanders, including those of the US Army Air Force in England. Gen Jimmy Doolittle was chosen to take command of the Eighth Air Force, replacing Gen Ira Eaker.

When Gen Doolittle took over the Eighth Air Force, the primary objective of the fighters became that of engaging the Luftwaffe and destroying it, rather than staying exclusively with the bombers to ensure their protection. This meant that VIII Fighter Command, still headed by Gen William Kepner, was able to despatch fighters out in front of the bomber stream as a blocking force. Also, a fighter group could pursue the enemy away from the bomber stream if its leader believed they could be successful, and it would not result in the bombers suffering excessive losses.

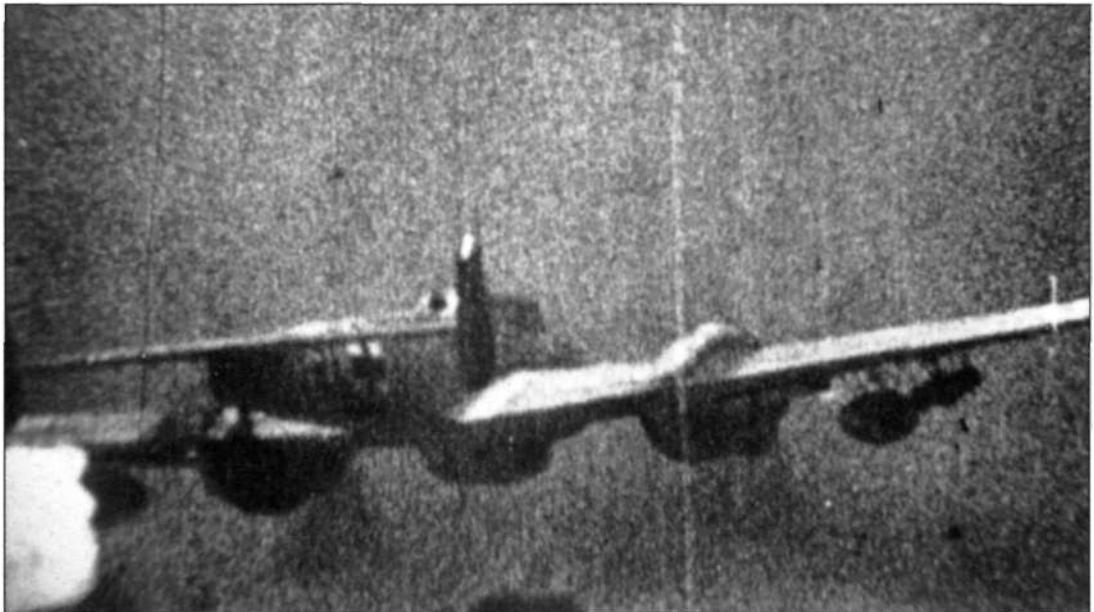
The 354th FG was now up to full strength, as it was fully equipped with new aircraft, and the pilots to fly them. Bad weather held up operations for the first few days of the month until 4 January, when Maj Bickell led

A group of ex-RCAF pilots who came to the 354th in January 1944 conduct a mock brief for the benefit of the camera. They are, from left to right, Lts Jerry Leach, B F Durham, Bart Tenore, L W Cocker, R T Stolze, James Dalglish and J W Edwards. Dalglish was the most successful of these pilots in terms of aerial victories, finishing the war with a tally of nine kills and 6.5 damaged. Having previously flown 16 sorties in Mustang Is with No 613 Sqn (during which time he claimed a Bf 109G damaged), he would go on to complete two tours with the 354th FG. Dalglish was made CO of the 353rd FS on 31 May 1945 (USAAF)



Future six-kill ace Lt Warren 'Red' Emerson (right) of the 355th FS tells 354th CO Lt Col Kenneth Martin how he got his Bf 110 (and Me 410 probable) west of Kiel on 5 January 1944. Note how the official censor has obliterated details of the map tucked into Martin's celluloid-windowed trouser pocket. Emerson would complete his tour with the 355th FS in September 1944, by which time he had flown 72 missions (W Emerson)

The gun camera film from 'Red' Emerson's P-51B, exposed on 5 January 1944, reveals how close he got to 'his' Bf 110G to ensure its demise. In this frame, the hapless *Pulk-Zerstörer*'s port external fuel tank has just erupted after being struck by a fusillade of 0.50-cal machine gun rounds. Note the twin 210 mm rocket tubes outboard of the starboard auxiliary wing tank and the 30 mm ventral gun pack on the bomber-destroyer's centreline. Both weapons made the Bf 110 a serious threat to the USAAF's heavy bombers, but in turn made the already unwieldy *Zerstörer* little more than a sitting duck when bounced by agile American fighter escorts. The 354th FG, in particular, exacted a heavy toll on the *Zerstörergeschwader* during the group's first months in combat in the ETO (USAAF)



42 Mustangs to Kiel in support of 569 bombers. High winds over the North Sea prevented the 354th's timely rendezvous with the bombers, and the fighters joined them late after they had already fought off numerous enemy attacks. The Luftwaffe was finally engaged near Cuxhaven, some 65 miles south-west of the target, and one German fighter was downed. However, the 354th also suffered a loss when Lt John Nall was last seen chasing a Junkers Ju 88 down through the undercast.

The group enjoyed far more success 24 hours later, when Maj Howard led 41 P-51s back to Kiel. As the 245-strong bomber stream (protected by 111 fighters) neared the target, the weather cleared, and the crews could see for miles while flying over a landscape covered with snow. German fighters remained conspicuous by their absence until the first of the bombers turned for home. Suddenly, a formation of some 45-50 twin-engined Bf 110s and Do 217s appeared.

One of the first Mustang pilots to effect an interception was Lt Warren S 'Red' Emerson of the 355th FS, who had become separated from his flight. Attacking alone, he did not hesitate to close on six rocket-firing Bf 110s. Emerson opened fire from about 200 yards and attained good strikes on one of the Messerschmitts, shattering the canopy and causing one of its engines to smoke heavily. The fighter went down in an ever-steepling dive, allowing Emerson to claim it as probably destroyed.

He then climbed back up to 25,000 ft and began to close on another four Bf 110s. Going in with guns blazing, Emerson destroyed one of the enemy aircraft and sent the others scattering. About three minutes later he was engaged with another three enemy fighters, and this time his Mustang was hit by a shell which badly damaged the aircraft, severing its hydraulic lines. Emerson was also struck by a shell fragment which deeply gashed his neck and cut through his parachute harness. Just when it appeared as if the Mustang pilot would be shot down, he was rescued by Lt Wallace Emmer of the 353rd FS. Although out of ammunition, the latter pilot attacked the enemy aircraft and succeeded in scattering them.

The 356th FS's Lt Richard E Turner was also in the thick of things that day, as his combat report reveals;

I was flying Starstud Green No 1, with Lt Stolzle as No 2, Lt Goodnight No 3 and Lt Miller No 4. We were despatched to cover a middle box of bombers with Starstud Blue Flight. Upon turning to starboard, we contacted a Dornier 217 (almost certainly a Bf 110 - Editor) lining up to the rear of the bomber formation. I tried to come on line astern but overshot the turn, and Lt Goodnight, with his wingman, closed on the Do 217. I pulled up and called Lt Stolzle, telling him to drop belly tanks, after which I spotted a Do 217 trying to sneak in on the bombers, so I closed

Captains Wallace Emmer (left) and Don Beerbower pose in front of a Mustang that has been recently sprayed with white identification bands. Seen early in 1944, both men became firm friends, and high-scoring aces, whilst serving with the 353rd FS. And both were ultimately destined to be shot down (by flak) on the same day, 9 August 1944 (USAAF)



in from above and fired at approximately 300 yards, observing strikes on both sides of the fuselage. I continued to close fast and continued firing in bursts of varying lengths. One engine caught fire and started trailing black smoke, and then I observed the right engine blow up in a large flash of flame. The Do 217, out of control, floundered down in a slow spiral. I claim it destroyed.

I then pulled up and took a quick burst at another Do 217, passing overhead, but observed no strikes. I then turned on another which might have been the same as the above and followed it down in a twisting turning dive from almost dead astern. I observed strikes but no results. I pulled up in a climbing turn and saw another Do 217 and started after it. At this time I saw tracers fly over my right wing. I looked back and found an Me 110 on my tail instead of Lt Stolzle. I pulled my stick back as far as I could and shot up, stalling out over the Me 110, who in turn shot under me while trying to pull up. Instead, he pushed his nose down and my plane fell through in a stall loop by itself and came out behind the '110's tail. I was very close, and fired at zero degrees deflection and saw strikes around the cockpit. Its right engine also caught fire. After I ceased firing I saw the canopy fly off and a round object came into view, which I assumed was the pilot bailing out. I almost collided at this point so I pulled up and away.

I then saw a single-engined plane some 5000 ft above me, and I climbed after it to join formation, for I was almost out of ammunition - my right guns were by then the only ones still functioning. Coming up under the single-engined plane, I observed it to be blue-grey instead of dark brown, so I closed to identify it from beneath and behind. I saw the crosses on the fuselage - an Me 109. I tried to line up astern for a shot, but had to be content with 15 degrees deflection to the left with only 20 or 30 rounds coming out, which expended my supply of ammunition. I was glad to see the '109 split-ess down and away, so I climbed out hunting for a '51 to come home with.'

Lt Col Martin was also involved in the big shoot-out, and on his third interception of the day he reported;

'Another Me 110 came into view and I closed to 200 yards, firing at the fuselage and right engine, which burst into flames. Lt Lane closed in and also fired, causing further damage. The rear gunner appeared dead and the pilot bailed out. The fighter was seen to crash by Lts Welden and Lane.'

Future 5.25-kill ace Lt Tommy 'Gnomee' Miller from Turner's flight also shot up two of the Bf 110s, severely damaging them. He was credited with a probable victory for the first fighter and a definite kill for the second one. His post-mission report stated;

I was Starstud Green No 4. Lt Goodnight, my element leader, made a steep right turn, coming in behind a Do 217. I dropped back to cover him and a '110 came up behind Goodnight. I closed to 300 yards dead astern on this E/A (enemy aircraft) and fired a one-second burst. I observed strikes on its belly between the engines. The E/A rolled over and started down, but before reaching the vertical he righted himself and I observed one 'chute open. The E/A then started a steep diving turn and I did not see him recover.

As I pulled up from the first encounter, I saw another '110 600 yards ahead and to the right. I closed to 400 yards and fired three short bursts - I observed no hits. On the fourth burst the left engine threw out an intense



Maj James H Howard strikes a pose for the camera in the cockpit of his P-51B-5 *DING HAO!* following his big day on 11 January 1944, when he single-handedly defended B-17s of the 401st BG north-west of Halberstadt, and was duly awarded the Medal of Honor for his efforts. Howard never actually claimed six Japanese aircraft shot down during his time with the AVG in 1941-42, his official victory tally totalling 2.333 destroyed in the air and four on the ground. However, due to pressure exerted by the USAAF's publicity machine, he reluctantly instructed S/Sgt Marcus Hanson to paint six 'rising suns', along with six swastikas, beneath the cockpit of his fighter (43-6315). Amongst the tallest of Mustang pilots at 6 ft 2 in, Howard had to have his seat moved fully back and his rudder pedals moved fully forward in order fit comfortably into the cockpit of a P-51 (USAAF)

cloud of white smoke and large pieces flew off. The E/A then did a half roll and started down with his left engine out. I closed to 150 yards and got in two more bursts. As he hung there upside down, I observed strikes on the right engine, and a number of pieces were falling off. I then saw strikes on his elevator and a large section of that flew off too. As I pulled up over him, he was floating along upside down with both engines on fire.'

When the final tally was counted for the day, the 354th 'Pioneer Mustang Group' had chalked up 14 confirmed victories without loss. This was an outstanding accomplishment for a group on only its 12th mission.

The next meeting with the Luftwaffe took place on 11 January, when Maj Howard led the group to Halberstadt (where a plant producing parts for the Ju 88 was sited) and Oschersleben (home of a large Fw 190 factory). VIII Fighter Command felt sure that these raids would provoke a response from the Luftwaffe, and indeed they did. Maj Howard reported;

'Our group was assigned to the first boxes of bombers to provide target support. When we rendezvoused with the bombers from the rear, being unable to determine where the first box was, I despatched two squadrons to cover the rear boxes. At this time I received a call from Goldsmith 12, who stated that the forward boxes were being attacked. Starstud squadron was sent to the forward box, arriving at 1130 hrs. I later discovered that this was where all the activity was centred, but at the time was unable to do anything about it, except use what we had to best advantage. The bombers passed over the targets and bombed, by which time it was 1150 hrs.

'We then met our first E/A. Flights of Starstud were despatched to deal with various attacking E/A and I also began attacking with my flight. On the first encounter, which turned into a melee, my flight lost me.

'When I regained bomber altitude, I discovered that I was alone and in the vicinity of Goldsmith 12 and Goldsmith 15. It was here that I spent



Crew chief S/Sgt M P Trice runs up the engine on P-51B-5 43-6315 *DING HAO!* in the early spring of 1944. This was actually the second *DING HAO!* flown by Jim Howard during his tour in the ETO, and was not the fighter he used on 11 January 1944. The exact identity of the machine he flew (coded 'AJ-X') during his famous sortie remains a mystery, some sources stating that it was P-51B-5 43-6375, although this aircraft was actually Howard's assigned Mustang, and as such wore the individual letter code 'A' denoting that it was the CO's machine. Perhaps 43-6375 had been damaged, or was grounded for maintenance, on the day Jim Howard defended the 401st BG, forcing him to fly 'AJ-X'
(W Louie)

approximately a half-hour chasing and scaring away attacking enemy aircraft from 20,000 down to 15,000 ft. There was one box of B-17s in particular that seemed to be under pressed attack by single-engine and twin- engined aircraft. There were twenty-odd bombers in a very compact formation. The attacking E/A were working individually. I could see from my position that each box was being harassed by attackers, but the majority of them were out of range for me. I had to choose the most opportune target and dive on him before he was able to get within range of the bombers. I had five combat encounters within this period of half an hour.

'Each time I would climb back up to bomber level, only to find another E/A tooling up for an attack. I was quite busy in a constant merry-go-round of climbing and diving on attackers, sometimes not firing my guns but presenting a good enough bluff for them to break off and dive away. For the first encounters and combat, all four guns fired. On the third I had two guns and on the fourth and fifth encounter only one gun. When I got down to one gun I was still engaged in this dive, attack and climb game for another two or three attacks. The E/A seemed reluctant to stay and fight, and would dive out.

'The reason for no other friendly aircraft being in the vicinity, or with me, was that the Starstud squadron had been sent off to deal with attackers, and the remaining two squadrons were engaged covering the boxes in the rear. I would say that there were about 100+ engaging enemy aircraft throughout all the boxes during this period. It's hard to estimate the number of enemy aircraft present during the major portion of this running fight, but all the boxes I could see had some activity around them.

'We were supposed to be with the bombers for an hour, and had already gone over that time. Had the relieving force of friendly fighters arrived and made rendezvous on time, it would have been possible to bag many more. But, using what we had on hand to a good advantage, I believe we came out on top with a very impressionable score.'

On his return from the mission Maj Howard modestly claimed two fighters destroyed, two probably destroyed and two damaged as his score for the day.



Leading the 353rd FS on the 11th was future 15-kill ace Lt Jack T Bradley, who recounted his day's activities as follows;

I was leading the squadron formation. We rendezvoused with the bombers at about 1115 hrs at 23,000 ft near Minden. The group leader despatched our squadron to cover the last three boxes into the target area. I assigned Blue flight to the right of the boxes, White flight to the left and Red flight, of which I was the leader, to the rear - all members of Green flight had previously aborted. We effected target cover uneventfully until about 1145 hrs. At this time Blue leader called "bandit at the rear of bomber formation". I observed an Me 110 out of range but closing on our "Big Friends" from astern.

'As my flight was in better position for attack than the other two, I peeled off to intercept the Me 110. As the flight dived towards the E/A, he broke down and to port. I fired a short burst from 45 degrees deflection at 400 yards, closing to 230 yards at approximately 15 degrees with only two guns in operation - one gun had jammed almost immediately. I thought that I had hit him, but the range was too great for me to positively claim that I had damaged him. When last seen, the E/A was in a steep dive, doing approximately 500 mph indicated. I observed an explosion on the side of a hill directly in the line of flight of the E/A shortly thereafter.

'My flight rejoined the bombers on the starboard side of the formation. At about 1210 hrs I saw two Fw 190s about 3000 ft above and approximately half a mile to starboard. I dived to the right to get directly beneath them and started to climb with everything forward. I later learned that at this point my second element left formation to engage an Me 110. The Fw 190s were in trail about 100 yards apart at about 23,000 ft. I closed fast to about 100 yards on the rear E/A, opening fire with about 15 degrees deflection. The E/A seemed to shudder momentarily and immediately burst into flames - I believe he exploded as I passed him, as some force jarred my aircraft rather violently.

'By now in range of the lead E/A, I held my fire until I was just 50 yards astern, pulling slightly to one side for small deflection. I fired a short burst and the E/A caught fire. As the pilot attempted to split-ess, I caught him

Another view of Jim Howard's assigned P-51B-5 43-6315, with S/Sgt Trice sat in the cockpit keeping an eye on the engine temperature gauges. This aircraft was one of the first Mustangs in the 354th FG to be fitted with a Malcolm hood, which became a highly sought after item amongst P-51 pilots in the ETO. Six small white brooms have been sprayed onto the nose above the exhaust stacks of this machine, denoting that it had completed six fighter sweeps when this shot was taken (USAAF)

with a second burst while he was on his back, nose down. I broke left to clear my tail and was rejoined by my wingman, who had been on my tail. The E/A was last seen engulfed in flame in a vertical dive. I signalled my wingman into mutual support, and we continued to provide target cover.'

The 355th FS was also very busy, as future 13-kill ace Lt Robert Stephens reported;

'I saw a straggler being attacked by three Me 410s. Picking out one of the '410s as my target, I worked in behind him. He saw me and started a steep spiral down. Following him, I gave him a few short bursts. Observing no strikes, I pulled off him at 12,000 ft. I circled around once more and saw that the same '410 was climbing back up toward the box of bombers. I waited for him and got behind him, this time unnoticed. With only one gun firing, I shot several long bursts before I saw strikes on his left engine nacelle. Then the engine blew up and the plane caught fire. I closed in, still firing, and observed more strikes all over the fuselage. Pulling up so as to avoid running into him, I rolled left to see the entire '410 engulfed in flames.'

On their return to Boxted the pilots were exuberant. Most of them had fired their guns in anger, and even though a number of pilots had failed to down an aircraft, many had at least damaged one. The overall confirmed score did not come through for some days, but when it was finalised the total was 16 destroyed, 7 probably destroyed and 19 damaged!

However, the biggest story of 11 January 1944 did not break until the men of the 401st Bombardment Group (BG) found out who their 'saviour' was that day - Maj Jim Howard was traced down through the 'buzz letters' on his aircraft. A few days later things were spelled out more clearly when a letter arrived for Maj Howard from Col Harold W Bowman, CO of the 401st BG. In his letter he stated;

'Your unprecedeted action in flying your P-51 alone and unaided into a swarm of German fighter planes, estimated between 30 and 40, in an effort to protect our Fortresses in the target area is a feat deserving of the highest commendation and praise. The fact that the odds were overwhelmingly against you, and that you had no hope of receiving assistance in your unusual struggle, did not deter you in your determination to engage the enemy.'

'The magnificent fight which you put up in the ensuing struggle was one which has elicited the praise and admiration of every one of the Fortress fliers who witnessed your actions. Members of this Group, returning from the operation, were lavish in their descriptions of the way you shot down enemy planes and, in particular, spoke in glowing terms of the attempts you made to protect the Combat Wing against attacks.'

The men of the Fortresses would confirm at least six victories for Howard, but the modest flier did not choose to do so. Regardless, the crews of the 401st recommended Maj Jim Howard for the Medal of Honor, which he received a few weeks later. Embarrassed with all the laudatory action by the bomber men, and the press when interviewed regarding his action, Howard would only say, 'I seen my duty and I done it'. Maj Jim Howard was the sole American fighter pilot flying in North-western Europe to be awarded his nation's highest honour.

There was no immediate repeat of the 354th's great success as bad weather came in and kept the P-51s on the ground for the next few days.

One of the most successful pilot/aircraft combinations within the 354th FG during its first six months in the ETO was Richard Turner in P-51B-1 43-12434 *SHORT-FUSE SALLEE*. He claimed eight kills and four damaged in this machine between 5 January and 11 April 1944. *SHORT-FUSE SALLEE* was photographed at Boxted sometime between Turner scoring his fifth victory on 11 February and his sixth on 3 March. Like his former CO, Jim Howard, Richard Turner secured a Malcolm hood for his P-51 soon after they became available. Turner reluctantly parted with 43-12434 in May 1944 when later model P-51Bs began to filter through to the 354th FG. The original *SHORT-FUSE SALLEE* was in turn passed on to VIII Fighter Command's 359th FG, which was then in the process of converting from Thunderbolts to Mustangs at East Wretham, in Norfolk. 43-12434 was issued to the 369th FS, coded 'IV-R' and christened *Dunquerque* by its new pilot, Lt Charles Staley. A combat veteran who had served with the 359th FG since April 1943, Staley completed his tour with the group in August 1944, having flown 74 missions (300 hours). Unlike Richard Turner, he failed to shoot anything down with 43-12434, although he was credited with having damaged ten enemy aircraft in strafing attacks. Following Staley's return to the US, 43-12434 was re-coded 'IV-P' and passed on to Lt Thomas Bur, who flew it until it was replaced by a P-51D (USAAF)

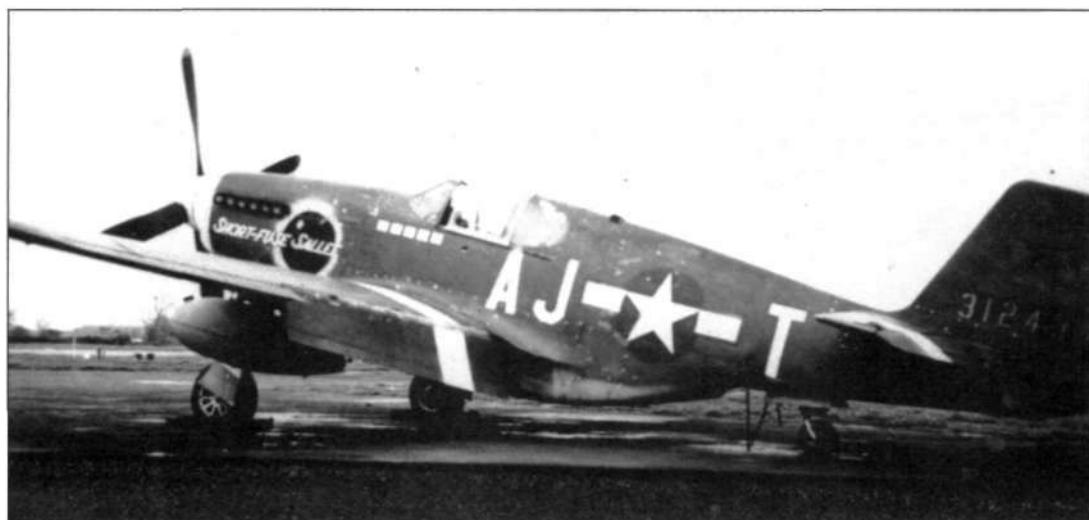
One of the biggest problems that the Mustang pilots were encountering during this period was the jamming of their fighters' machine guns. It was found that this was due to the fact that the guns were canted at an angle. When the aircraft was being manoeuvred violently while in combat, the ammunition did not feed cleanly into the guns. This was finally rectified when one of the maintenance men obtained some electric ammunition feed motors that were being used on Martin B-26 bombers to feed ammunition from the boxes to the guns in the aircraft. These also seemed to work fine in the P-51, so all the Boxted fighters were quickly modified.

The 354th did not go back out until 14 January, when Maj Bickell led 43 Mustangs (out of a force of 645 fighters, escorting 552 bombers) to the Pas de Calais area of France. Only one victory was scored, and the group also lost a pilot to causes unknown. Bad weather then moved in once more, and the group enjoyed a seven-day vacation from operations.

The 354th sortied again on 21 January, when all three squadrons escorted bombers returning to targets along the French coast - no German aircraft were encountered by the group. Three days later, newly-promoted Col Martin led the group to Frankfurt, and although limited action was seen, a skirmish with four Fw 190s near Brussels cost the 353rd FS its commander, Capt Robert Priser. He had served with the RAF before joining the 354th, and along with Capt Joseph Giltner, who was on a temporary assignment to the group from the 357th FG, both men were downed by the Focke-Wulf fighters. Young Texan Capt Jack T Bradley (one of the original members of the group) became the new CO of the 353rd FS.

Maj Howard led 40 Mustangs to Frankfurt on 29 January, where they sighted a number of Luftwaffe fighters in the air but were unable to close with most of them. On the way home the enemy was engaged in the vicinity of Kirchberg, and four Fw 190s were shot down and two probably destroyed without loss.

The following day Maj Howard led the group to Brunswick, and once again soon after leaving the target large numbers of twin-engined fighters turned up and were engaged. Howard went after one of the Bf 110s, which he later described as 'a nightfighter version with radar antenna on the nose'. The Mustang pilot opened fire and his opposite number made a



P-51B-1 43-12437 was one of the first Mustangs received by the 356th FS in November 1943, and after completing a considerable number of missions in a short space of time, it was declared combat expired in late February 1944. Groundcrewmens Will Louie and Mark Hanson then stripped it of its Olive Drab paint, and the latter adorned it with a 'Red Ass' emblem below the cockpit. The fighter then briefly served as a squadron 'hack' until written off on 10 March when it crashed with Lt Mark Tyner at the controls - he was killed outright in the accident. Tyner was 'rat racing' at low level with fellow pilot Lt Charles Simonson at the time. The accident investigation board subsequently discovered that the weary fighter's engine mounting bolts had failed in flight (USAAF)

violent diving turn to the right. He entered the undercast before Howard could close any further.

The major then sighted a straggling B-17 with a Bf 110 closing on its rear. As the enemy aircraft started firing at the bomber, the P-51 pilot closed to within range and opened up with his four 'fifties'. Firing commenced at about 300 yards, and continued until Howard had to pull up to avoid a collision. The Bf 110 rolled to the left and headed down for the clouds. A fire started near the fuselage, and before the fighter had reached the undercast flames could be seen pouring out from one of its engines.

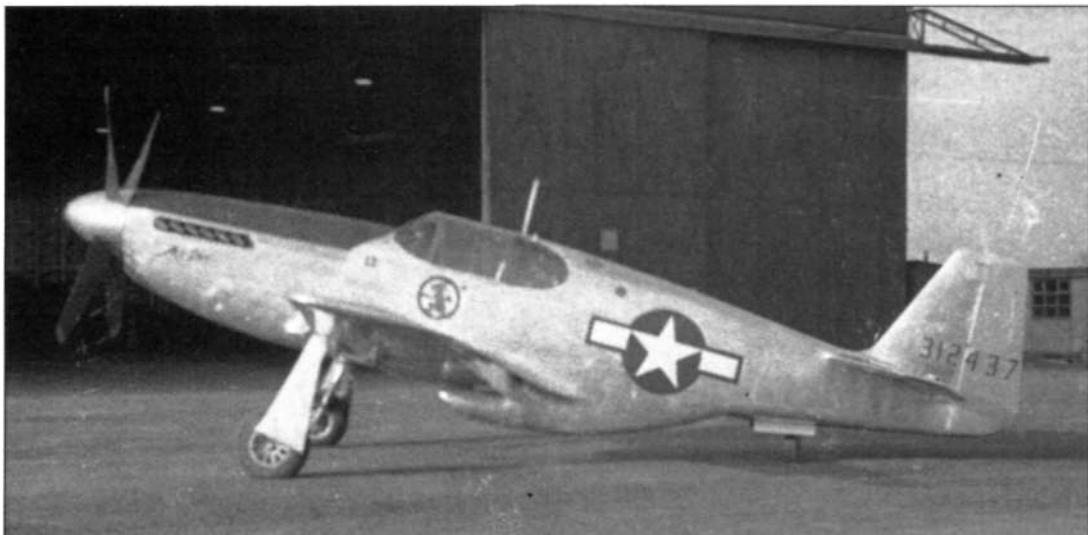
Newly-promoted Capt Richard Turner also observed a straggler being harassed, although this time the bomber's tormentors took the form of four Bf 109s. He immediately led his flight down to attack the Messerschmitts, and three of them broke for the clouds. The fourth fighter continued with his attack, however, as Turner recounts here;

'I dropped 30 degrees of flaps to keep from overrunning. I opened fire at about 200 yards at zero degrees deflection. I saw that my fire was going underneath the '109, so I raised the pip, whereupon the fighter exploded. The Me 109 broke up immediately in front of me, so I flew through it.

I turned into the sun and picked up my flight.'

Altogether, five enemy fighters fell to the guns of the 334th that day. There were no losses.

The new year had started well for the 354th FG, January seeing the 'Pioneer Mustang Group' credited with 42 official victories for the loss of just three pilots. And not only did Maj Jim Howard win the Medal of Honor, he also became the first P-51 ace, and the first ace of the group, when he scored his fifth victory on 30 January.



MISFORTUNE AND 'BIG WEEK'

The 354th FG continued to fly bomber escort missions in February, Col Ken Martin leading 50 Mustangs to Wilhelmshaven on the 3rd, although the group saw little action. Nonetheless, the P-51 flown by Lt Richard Klien was lost when its engine froze up due to a leaking oil line. The pilot was forced to bail out over the North Sea, some 14 miles east of Southwold, in Suffolk. The water was bitterly cold at this time of year, and he was given little chance of survival. However, Klien was lucky, for he was picked up by a German naval vessel and made a PoW.

Subsequent missions on 4, 5 and 6 February saw no aerial action, but this all changed on the 8th. Word had come down from Eighth Air Force Headquarters to the effect that fighter escorts returning from missions where the bombers were not being harassed could 'hit the deck' and strafe opportunist targets. Maj Howard had led 41 Mustangs to Frankfurt that day, and after clearing the target area, he had given his pilots permission to get strafing. The men shot up locomotives, airfields and any other targets of interest they could locate. However, flak around most German airfields was very intense, and four pilots were lost. A disturbed Col Martin declared a halt to the strafing action until further notice.

One of the most frustrating, and potentially deadly, threats that the group had had to face from the beginning of its operations in the ETO were attacks made on its aircraft by P-47s and, at times, P-38s. Unfortunately, the silhouette of the P-51 closely resembled that of the Bf 109, and although Mustangs had visited all VIII Fighter Command bases so that pilots could view the aircraft close-up, the attacks continued. And just such an incident during the 354th's mission to Brunswick on 10 February almost cost them one of their most outstanding pilots.

Some 30 Bf 109s and around 50 twin-engined fighters had come up to oppose the bombers, resulting in numerous engagements taking place during the course of the mission. Col Martin was credited with a Bf 109 and an 'Me 210' (actually a Bf 110), and altogether the 354th downed eight fighters for the loss of a single P-51. Upon returning to Boxted, the pilots reported that whilst trying to deal with Luftwaffe attacks, they had encountered considerable trouble from numerous P-47s - and there were plenty of them in the skies over Germany on this day, with 357 Thunderbolts from eight groups having sortied to Brunswick!

For example, Lt Glenn Eagleston and Lt Edward Regis had joined in a combat between some P-47s and Bf 109s, with Eagleston quickly latching onto one of the Messerschmitts. Having damaged his prey, the Mustang pilot was on the point of finishing off the fighter when his P-51B-1 (43-12308) was attacked by a Thunderbolt.

In the ensuing melee, Lt Regis managed to down a second Bf 109, but Eagleston's victim escaped when 43-12308 was badly damaged by one of

the P-47s. The future ace's Mustang had sustained a bad hit in its oil system, and began to haemorrhage precious lubrication fluid as it headed back across the English Channel. Fortunately for Eagleston, he was able to make landfall and bail out just miles from Boxted at Ardleigh. Descending by parachute during a heavy snowfall, Eagleston landed amongst a group of Homeguardsmen, who duly drove him back to his base.

The next day, 11 February, the 354th notched up its 25th mission when Col Martin led 38 Mustangs that were tasked with escorting 223 B-17s sent to hit targets in Frankfurt, Ludwigshafen and Saarbrücken. This date was doubly significant, for it also saw the Eighth Air Force's first permanently assigned Mustang group, the 357th FG, complete a 'milk run' to France. The group was led by none other than Maj Jim Howard. A number of senior pilots from the 357th had previously completed missions with the 354th as part of the group's introduction to the ETO.

Although the 357th had seen nothing but scattered flak over occupied France on this day, to the north-east the 354th had run into a large formation of twin-engined fighters just as the bombers had approached Frankfurt. Now very much combat veterans, the Mustang pilots acquitted themselves well with claims for 11 enemy aircraft destroyed - Lt Charles Gumm top scored by downing an Me 410 and a Ju 88, leaving him just one victory short of ace status. However, there were two more losses, with one of them being none other than group CO, Col Ken Martin. Here, he recounts his mid-air collision in P-51B-5 43-6359;

The Germans were attempting to keep us from getting to our rendezvous with the bombers — first they hit us from above when we passed the French Coast on the way in, then again when we were close to the bombers. Their radar could always put them on top of us. Usually they went for the bombers, but on this occasion they had realised that they needed to stop us before they could get to the bombers or they would be vulnerable from the rear while making their attack. On the second attack my wingman was shot down, and I was able to get the 109 that got him (giving Martin his all important fifth kill - Editor).

'Finishing a quick 360-degree turn after shooting down the '109, I saw another '109 approximately a mile away, so I headed my plane toward him. He was in a slight turn and saw me coming towards him, so he wheeled around and headed for me. We were both firing in a head on run. Due to our past gun trouble, I looked at mine to see if they were firing, as I did not seem to be hitting the target. However, they *were* firing, as were the guns on the Me 109. I guess my aim

Col Jim Howard (right) is seen in discussion with Maj Gen Elwood 'Pete' Quesada, Commanding General of IX Fighter Command. Deemed too valuable to risk in further combat by Army Air Force 'brass' back in Washington DC, Jim Howard involuntarily left the 354th FG on 12 April 1944 to be 'absorbed' within Quesada's staff at Ninth Air Force Headquarters, situated in Sunninghill Park, Ascot (USAAF)





was poor, and so was his. Anyway, the last thing I remembered was seeing the cross on the side of the '109 on my right at the same level, about ten feet out, just as we hit.'

Miraculously, both Col Martin and his Luftwaffe opponent survived the collision, and wound up in the same hospital. Martin ended the war a PoW, and he was never credited with the destruction of this final Bf 109.

The following day Gen Pete Quesada visited Boxted and pinned silver leaves on Maj Jim Howard, promoting him to lieutenant colonel and giving him command of the 354th FG. Capt Richard Turner duly filled the vacant CO's position within the 356th FS, although he was more than a little surprised when he was told that he was to replace Jim Howard as the unit's commanding officer;

The men in the squadron had expected a major or lieutenant colonel to be transferred in to assume the CO position Jim had vacated. To the surprise of us all, it was I who was promoted to the job of squadron commander. I was only a captain, and a newly promoted one at that, and the inherent responsibilities of the new job made me unsure of my own qualifications for the position. I even went so far as to suggest to Howard that I would just as soon remain with the squadron as a flight commander. Howard made it very clear that he "didn't give a damn what I'd just as soon do", pointing

New group CO Lt Col George Bickell (left) meets the 'big brass' at Boxted, namely Air Marshal 'Boom' Trenchard ('father' of the RAF), Maj Gen Ralph Royce (Deputy Commanding General of the Ninth Air Force) and Brig Gen Otto Weyland (Commanding General of XIX Tactical Air Force) (USAAF)

Lt Edward R Ryan of the 355th FS flew P-51B-1 43-12130 *Roberta* in early 1944, using the fighter to claim four kills and four damaged (USAAF)





Texan Capt Jack T Bradley took over the 353rd FS after Capt Priser was lost on 24 January 1944. One of the 354th's longest-serving pilots, he eventually became its last CO in late May 1945, having completed two tours with the group. By then Bradley had been credited with shooting down 15 aircraft, probably destroying a further three and damaging no fewer than 12.666! Such statistics made him the 354th's third ranking ace (USAAF)

out that it was his responsibility to assign positions in the best interest of the squadron, not the individual. It was the only time I was ever reprimanded and commended at the same time.'

Throughout February the Eighth Air Force had been waiting for a few days of good weather to commence Operation *Argument*, which was a series of missions targeting German factories involved in the production of aircraft for the Luftwaffe. It was hoped that these missions would also spur the Luftwaffe into action, thus giving the pilots of VIII Fighter Command a chance to inflict critical losses on Germany's fighter force.

Finally, on 19 February, several days of good weather were forecast, and orders were hastily sent out to bases across East Anglia and south-east England for the mobilisation of virtually all USAAF fighters and bombers in the area. The following day saw the beginning of what was to become known as 'Big Week'.

On 20 February deputy group CO Lt Col Bickell led 54 P-51s that had been given the job of providing close

support to 417 B-17s from the 1st Bomb Division heading for targets in Leipzig. No fewer than 835 USAAF fighters sortied on this day (including 19 from the 357th FG), setting a record for VIII Fighter Command which lasted until 25 February, when 899 were put up! The vast majority of these machines were P-47s, 660+ being drawn from 11 groups, including two from the Ninth Air Force.

The 354th arrived early at the pre-briefed rendezvous point, and immediately sighted a formation of bombers coming under attack from 50+ German fighters. The P-51 pilots sprung into action in defence of the B-17s, and a massive fighter battle ensued. Capt Jack Bradley remembers;

'We had rendezvoused (R/V) with the bombers of the 1st Task Force about 30 minutes early south of Hannover. The group leader assigned our squadron to the middle box of bombers. The first box was under attack when we made our R/V, and I called this information to my group leader. I assigned half my squadron to the right of the bomber formation and I lead the other eight in support of the left side. About 20 minutes after the R/V Blue flight attacked four Me 109s coming in at eight o'clock to the bomber formation. At 1300 hrs I saw a B-17 straggler from the first bomber box being stalked by a '109. I gave my flight instructions to drop belly tanks and attack the E/A. As I closed into range, Blue flight cut me off and shot the E/A down. I saw the E/A in flames and out of control.'

I assembled the flight and rejoined the bomber formation at 1320 hrs. I saw another '109 preparing to attack a second B-17 that was aborting. I opened fire on the E/A before he could fire on the aborting "Fort". The '109 split-essed and dived down. I dived with him and fired a short burst, which was not effective. I closed to 350 yards and fired about a four-second burst. I saw strikes beginning on the right wing and fuselage, and the E/A went into a vertical dive from about 10,000 ft. I started to pick up my wingman and tried to watch the E/A hit the ground. However, I lost sight of him for a few seconds and after completing the turn, I saw an explosion on the ground with white smoke and flame coming up.'

The group was credited with 14 confirmed victories and no losses.

Lt Col Howard led the 354th the following day when the group escorted B-17s from the 3rd Bomb Division that had been sent to attack targets in Brunswick. Once again the Luftwaffe rose in a fury, with over 200 fighters converging on the bomber stream. Large dogfights filled the sky, and pilots from the 354th claimed a further ten aircraft destroyed.

One of the victorious Mustang pilots was Lt Albert Redfern of the 356th FS who, along with his element leader, ended up in a turning fight with an Fw 190. Redfern stated that he and the Focke-Wulf pilot continued to turn into each other for a full ten minutes before the American began to drop his flaps - first to ten degrees and finally to twenty, when he was finally able to pull his nose through to take a shot. The German pilot began to drop full flaps too when he saw what was happening, but it was too late. As he hung momentarily, after dropping his flaps, he was hit by Redfern and went down in an uncontrollable spin. When Redfern came out of the spin, he found a further two Fw 190s on his tail, but he was saved by his element leader, Lt V E Chambers, who chased them away.

Squadronmate Lt Frank O'Connor also 'bagged' an Fw 190 after following it through a series of barrel rolls. He finally caught the German

Damp underfoot and misty overhead
- these were the conditions that all fighter groups often had to deal with during their time in the ETO. Here, P-51B-1 43-12451 of the 355th FS has a 75 US gal drop tank affixed to its starboard wing in preparation for an impending bomber escort mission to Germany. Initially issued to future five-kill ace 1Lt Gil Talbot, who christened it "Peggy", 43-12451 was passed on to 1 Lt Clayton Gross when the former took delivery of brand new P-51B-5 43-6737 in March 1944. By then Talbot had already flown half a dozen fighter sweeps in the original "Peggy" (hence the six 'broom' symbols sprayed onto the fuselage forward of the cockpit), and shot down an Me 410 and damaged an 'Me 209'. Gross had the nickname *LIVE BAIT* applied beneath the exhaust stacks on the port side of 43-12451 soon after acquiring the fighter, as well as the name "GWENDOLYN" immediately below the cockpit. A future six-kill ace, Gross would duly claim four Bf 109s destroyed (and two more damaged) whilst flying the veteran fighter during his first tour with the 355th FS (via Michael O'Leary)





His hair still in a mess after having worn his flying helmet for over three hours, Californian 2Lt Don McDowell of the 353rd FS enjoys cup of coffee and a doughnut in the squadron operations hut soon after completing a bomber escort mission to Brunswick on 21 February 1944. He is grinning because his claim for three fighters (two Bf 109s and a Bf 110) destroyed has just been confirmed. McDowell went on to score a total of 8.5 victories prior to being posted Missing in Action on 28 May 1944 during a long-range heavy escort mission to Magdeburg (USAAF)

pilot with a solid burst of fire, which sent him down in flames — O'Connor was also credited with damaging a second Fw 190 and probably destroying an 'Me 210' (almost certainly an Me 410).

On 22 February the 354th FG went to Aschersleben and Halberstadt, with Lt Col Bickell leading the group. Nearing Germany, the Mustangs were intercepted by a host of Luftwaffe fighters before some of them had even rendezvoused with the B-17s. Perhaps the most colourful combat of the day was flown by Capt Robert J Brooks of the 356th FS, who was fortunate to return home. His post-mission statement read;

'I was leading Starstud Squadron. We had just rendezvoused with the 2nd Combat Wing south of the target. After about five minutes of escort, a flight of 16+ unidentified aircraft appeared at 11 o'clock high to the bombers. My flight climbed from 23,000 ft toward the bogies. I identified the aircraft as Me 110s and dropped tanks. The '110s had a high cover of Me 109s. I lined up on the lead Me 110 at about a 20- to 30-degree deflection from the right beam and fired a short burst. I turned right and observed strikes in the centre of the fuselage. I claim this '110 as damaged.

'We then pulled up to meet the attack of the high cover '109s. As we pulled toward the rear of the bomber box about four '109s came down and we engaged them. I manoeuvred in order to intercept one of the E/A, which was then at about 21,000 ft. I lined him up and got in a 20-degree deflection shot from high, right astern. I fired a short burst and saw strikes along the right wing and the cockpit area. This E/A seemed to be hit hard by the fire, for he flicked to the left as I hit him and went straight down. I claim this '109 as damaged.

'As we were climbing back up to bomber level, I saw two '110s attacking a straggling "Fort". We closed in for the attack, but the '17 was using very

violent evasive tactics and we had trouble lining them up. I fired a short burst, allowing insufficient deflection, but then dropped 20 degrees of flaps and fired about four short bursts from high astern. I got hits along the right wing. As my fire hit the E/A, he straightened out and I moved in close, firing from about ten degrees deflection. These hits were in his engine, and caused large quantities of black smoke. The E/A then slowly rolled over onto its back and spiralled down, and it appeared to be out of control. I claim this Me 110 as probably destroyed.

'As we climbed back up to the bombers I spotted a lone '109 at approximately 23,000 ft, tooling up for an attack on the box. I closed in from the right and pulled up astern and a little below. I fired a long burst, observing strikes on the wings and tail surfaces. I continued to fire short bursts and the '109 then exploded along the wing roots while pouring a trail of black smoke. The E/A flipped over into a tight spin and did not pull out. I claim this Me 109 as destroyed.

'We regained bomber altitude, 23,000 ft, and spotted three bandits at three o'clock to the bombers. We turned into the attack as they started down. They saw our flight and positioned themselves for an attack on us. I turned cross-sun while watching them, and identified them as '109s. They closed on us from astern and above. Waiting until the E/A were within firing range, I then called a break. The flight split up. I checked my tail, saw it was clear and pulled up in a tight spiral for an attack.

'I saw two aircraft coming down on me, head on, from 20,000 ft. The lead ship was a '109, and I presumed the second one to be a wingman. The '109 was in my sights and I fired at almost point blank range. The '109 was not firing at me. I saw his yellow spinner and continued to fire, observing strikes on his ship. I thought we were going to collide, but at the last minute he lifted one wing to break, and by so doing hit my left wing, shearing off a three-foot section of the tip. I manoeuvred to avoid a spin and saw the second aircraft, which was a P-51, on the '109's tail, pouring hits into the already smoking E/A from slightly above. The P-51 was flown by Lt Welden, my wingman. The entire flight joined up and we started for home. I claim this '109 as destroyed, shared with Lt Welden.'

A most remarkable day for Capt Brooks!

The 354th had added a further 13 victories to its ever-increasing tally for the loss of one pilot, Lt Wah Kau Kong of the 353rd FS. Kong, who prided himself in being the only Chinese fighter pilot in the ETO at that time (Lt Frank S Fong of the 359th FG arrived in the UK soon after Kong's death), had just shared in the destruction of an Me 410 with Capt Jack Bradley when his Mustang was hit hard by cannon fire from a Bf 110. P-51B-1 43-12393 *Chinaman's Chance* exploded in mid-air.

An escort mission to Schweinfurt on the 24th saw very little activity for the 354th, with the only victory being an 'Me 210' (Me 410) shared by Capt Robert Stephens and an unknown P-38 pilot. Perhaps the most significant event of the day was the combat debut of the Ninth Air Force's 363rd FG, which became only the third P-51B-equipped outfit to be declared operational in the ETO.

Lt Col Howard led the group to Nuremburg on the 25th, and future 6.25-kill ace Lt Robert Welden of the 356th FS once again found himself in the thick of things, sharing a Bf 109 with three other pilots, an Fw 190 with Lt Tommy Miller and claiming a Bf 109 downed all by himself. Aces

Capt Robert Stephens and Lt Charles Gumm also scored on this mission, increasing their tallies to 6.5 and 6 kills respectively. Overall, a total of seven victories were chalked up by the group.

The week of 21-25 February, which became known as 'Big Week', had seen the Eighth Air Force drop over 10,000 tons of bombs on the German aircraft industry for the loss of 132 bombers and 29 fighters. USAAF bomber gunners and fighter pilots had claimed 204 Luftwaffe aircraft destroyed during this period, and while this figure may have been overstated, the Germans had lost air superiority over their homeland. More significantly, the Luftwaffe had suffered the loss of many experienced fighter leaders and veteran pilots, who would prove to be irreplaceable.

It was thought at the time that the raids had also damaged the German aircraft industry to the point that it would never recover. Unfortunately this did not prove to be true, for so much of the production process had by then already been dispersed and moved underground. Indeed, as 1944 progressed the production of fighter aircraft in particular increased. Eventually this provided the Luftwaffe's fighter force with a surplus of aircraft and no experienced pilots to fly them.

Capt Jack Bradley led the 354th to Brunswick on 29 February for the group's last sortie of an eventful month, although it proved to be little more than a 'milk run'. However, on the way home South Carolinian Lt James Lane suffered an overheated engine and he was forced to belly land his P-51, thus joining the ranks of the PoWs. A member of the 356th FS, Lane's loss was felt particularly hard by his CO, Richard Turner;

'Jim Lane was the first pilot I lost as CO. It was a hard blow for me for Jim had been an old classmate of mine in 42-I. During assembly on the runway at take-off, Lane had parked too long downwind with his engine running, thus depriving his radiator of sufficient air cooling, and popped his coolant overflow valve. It was standard procedure to abort the mission and let an alternate take your place when this happened, but Lane had been grounded for some time by the flight surgeon and had only recently regained flying status. He had been impatiently looking forward to this mission, feeling behind the rest of us in opportunities for kills.'

'Ignoring the rule of aborting, he deliberately took off in his regular position. Below 20,000 ft his engine operated normally, but once the group got to rendezvous altitude at 25,000 ft, the loss of coolant caught up with him, overheating the engine and causing it to fail. By the time anyone was aware of his trouble there was nothing we could do to help him as he deadsticked his Mustang down to inevitable capture. It was a tragic and unnecessary loss, for we encountered no opposition on the mission. It was, however, a sad lesson to the squadron on the high cost of negligence.'

February had seen the 354th FG make excellent progress, flying a dozen escort missions and scoring a confirmed 63.5 kills for the loss of 12 pilots.

Tragedy struck the group on the first day of March when the 355th's Lt Charles Gumm met his fate in a desperate attempt to save others. Ironically, having scored the 354th's first victory, and duly become one of its early aces whilst completing more than a dozen missions deep into enemy territory, Gumm was to lose his life on a routine training flight when his assigned P-51B-1 (43-106749) suffered engine trouble.

He could have easily bailed out, but instead he made an attempt to bring his ailing Mustang back to Boxted. Gumm was within visual distance of his

base when his engine finally quit just as he was approaching the village of Nayland, on the Suffolk-Essex border. The ace continued to fight the controls of the rapidly descending Mustang in an effort to clear the rooftops of a small terrace of houses that lay directly in his path. He succeeded in guiding the fighter away from the village, whereupon he attempted to land in a nearby field, but one wing hit a tree and the P-51 smacked into the ground, killing Charles Gumm. He had saved the villagers at the cost of his own life.

'BIG B'

Right from the start of the Eighth Air Force's daylight bombing campaign in August 1942, aircrewmen had always wondered when they would get to strike at the capital of the Third Reich, Berlin. Bomber crews had quickly realised that it would be a disaster for them to attempt such a mission unescorted, but with the arrival of the P-51B in the ETO, as well as the delivery of improved versions of the P-47D, they could now go all the way.

Berlin at last became a target on 3 March, when a number of bomb groups briefed for an attack on the capital. The 354th, meanwhile, was tasked with providing the escort for bombers striking at Oranienburg, only a few miles north of Berlin. Lt Col Bickell led the mission, which encountered terrible weather. The Mustangs climbed to 42,000 ft, where they lost contact with the bombers — most of the 'heavies' had been recalled, leaving a mere handful that never received the word to return. No opposition was seen over the target area.

On the way out of the target area the P-51s encountered about 20 German fighters in the vicinity of Ludwigslust, and a series of dogfights took place. Capt Richard Turner was leading the 356th FS when he sighted some 15 Bf 109s coming down on him. His combat report stated;

I called Starstud ships to drop tanks and break, which we did. After breaking, my engine quit and I discovered I had not switched tanks. I lost about 5000 ft in starting my engine, and became separated from my flight. The '109s were on my tail, closing fast. I chopped the throttle and lowered flaps, skidding to the right, which allowed the first E/A to overshoot. I then proceeded to close on him and I opened fire at very close range. I observed strikes at the wing roots and around the canopy. I broke away, fearing the E/A behind me. As I did so, I saw the '109 that I had just fired on smoking and the pilot bailing out. The 'chute opened and the aircraft continued to fall through the overcast.

I turned with the second '109, who was trying to pick up deflection on me. At this point another Starstud ship came down and drove off the E/A, the '109 split-essing and diving away out of sight.'



Early 354th FG ace Lt Charles Gumm Jr lost his life when his P-51B-1 42-106749 crashed into a field near the village of Nayland on 1 March 1944. Gumm had been on a routine training sortie over Norfolk when his Mustang's engine began to run rough, and instead of bailing out he decided to try and return to Boxted. The fighter's engine quit within sight of the airfield, and Gumm just managed to clear the row of houses visible in the background of this photograph before clipping the tree around which the shattered wreckage of his Mustang can be seen (USAAF)

Lt Mark Tyner picked up the only other victory of the day.

Berlin was once again the target for most of the bombers the following day, but the dreadful weather continued. Many aircraft received recalls, and only a handful made it as far as the German capital. The 354th succeeded in reaching the target, however, led there by Lt Col Howard, although once over Berlin they met with little opposition. Indeed, only one victory was claimed when aces Lts Bob Shoup and Frank O'Connor of the 356th FS shared in the destruction of a Bf 109. Two pilots did not return from the mission, one ditching his Mustang in the North Sea 25 miles east of Lowestoft, on the Suffolk coast.

There was no activity on 5 March, but clear weather the following day brought about the first real mission to Berlin, which was in turn the cause of one of the biggest aerial battles of the entire war. The Luftwaffe put up literally every fighter it had in response to the 730-strong bomber stream sortied by the Eighth Air Force. Escorting the B-17s and B-24s were 801 fighters, including 100 P-51Bs from the 4th, 354th and 357th FGs. Despite the massive fighter presence, no fewer than 69 bombers and 11 fighters were also lost. The Luftwaffe paid a high price for this success, however, with USAAF fighter pilots alone being credited with 81 aircraft destroyed, in addition to the numerous claims made by bomber gunners.

The 354th did not encounter any of the big gaggles of fighters that the 4th, 56th and 357th FGs engaged, although its pilots did see significant action, downing seven aircraft. Future 14.5-kill ace Lt Lowell 'Brue' Brueland of the 355th FS recalled:

'Our flight saw about six Ju 88s above and just ahead of us - between us and the bombers. We went after them and tried to head them off, but they had the advantage of altitude. I managed to tag onto the last one, opened fire and kept on scoring hits. His engine then started smoking. I kept firing and the engine burst into flames, sending him down out of control.'

'As I pulled up on another '88, I looked back and saw the first one explode. I fired on the one ahead of me and his engine started to smoke. Lt Billie Harris, my wingman, who was coming up under me yelled, "Let me have him". I pulled up and let him have it. He got hits all over it. The '88 smoked like hell and went into a dive, and I saw the pilot pull up the canopy and jump out.'

Lt Col Bickell, who led the 354th, on the mission, had this to report;

'An Me 109 came down for a tail pass at the "Forts". I came down from 23,000 ft, blacked out, and came to at 13,000 ft. I started back up and got on the tail of the '109 and started firing. He bailed out. We saw about 50+ Me 109s and Fw 190s but they would not engage.'

There was no action the following day, but on 8 March the 354th returned to Berlin. Once more the bombers were out in great numbers, with 623 of them being escorted by 891 fighters, 174 of which were P-51s (from the 4th, 352nd, 354th, 355th, 357th and 363rd FGs). For the Luftwaffe it was another day of frustration, for as hard as its units fought, they again suffered heavy losses. The escorts were credited with the destruction of 79 enemy aircraft, while the bomber gunners again entered high claims.

The 354th's contribution to this impressive tally were the two kills claimed by Lt Frank O'Connor, which took his score to 7.5 victories. Having managed to chase down an Fw 190 and a Bf 109 some 50 miles south-west of Berlin, he duly made short work of both fighters. O'Connor's

Newly promoted Capt Don Beerbower poses on the wing of his P-51B-1 43-12373 *BONNIE "B"* in late January 1944. The 354th FG's second-ranking ace with 15.5 kills, Beerbower led the high-scoring 353rd FS from 30 June 1944 until he was shot down by flak during a strafing attack on Epernay airfield near Reims, in France, on 9 August 1944. Although he managed to vacate his stricken P-51B prior to it crashing, Beerbower died shortly thereafter of wounds he had suffered either when his Mustang had been hit, or when he had reportedly struck the tail section of the fighter soon after bailing out (USAAF)



P-51 had, however, been struck by two 0.50-cal 'slugs' fired from one of the bombers when he got too close during the interception!

These bloody aerial clashes over Berlin finally paid off for the Eighth Air Force on 9 March when 526 bombers, escorted by 808 fighters, had free rein over the German capital. To the amazement of all involved the Luftwaffe remained absent from the skies, leaving the B-17s of the 1st and 3rd Bomb Divisions to accurately hit their targets while their escorts roamed all over the city at will. This mission was certainly proof positive that Allied air power had achieved air superiority over Europe. This was the goal of the current air offensive, for the impending invasion of France would have been doomed to failure had this not been accomplished.

The 'Pioneer Mustang Group' was idle for about a week following this hectic sequence of long distance raids. It next sortied into Germany on 16 March, when 740 bombers struck the Messerschmitt factories in the Augsburg area. Appearing in strength once more, the Luftwaffe hit the bomber stream hard, with rocket-firing Bf 110s proving to be amongst the most formidable foes.

The most successful pilot of the day for the 354th was Californian Lt Bill Simmons of the 355th FS. Forced to abort the mission just short of the target due to a rough-running engine, he turned back in the company of his wingman. Within seconds of dropping his auxiliary tanks, Simmons discovered that his engine was no longer playing up, and the two

Mustangs turned back to take part in the mission. Whilst looking for other P-51s to formate with, they sighted a number of enemy aircraft and dived down on them. Both men overshot the German fighters due to the speed of their dive, but when they pulled up they found themselves behind two Fw 190s that were getting ready to attack the bombers. Simmons moved in on one of them and opened fire. Good strikes were observed and then he sighted the canopy sliding back. Simmons recalled:

'I didn't watch the pilot bail out because the other joker was still up above. My wingman told me later he saw the pilot bail out. I zoomed back up and there he was as big as life, just sitting there. I closed this time to a very close range. When I fired, the plane literally started to come apart. The strikes were all grouped on the empennage and canopy. This new ammo is the real thing (armour-piercing incendiary). The Jerry fell off into a glide, getting steeper all the time. I believe the pilot was dead.'



Don Beerbower's great buddy in the 353rd FS was Wallace Emmer, both men having been assigned to the unit in January 1943, and both promoted to captain on 15 January 1944. Each finished with near-identical scores, Emmer claiming 14 kills. In a final cruel twist of fate, both friends fell to flak on 9 August 1944, Beerbower during a morning sortie and Emmer that afternoon. As previously mentioned, Beerbower died just hours later, but Emmer, who had been badly burnt, lingered on in a German military hospital until 15 February 1945 (USAAF)

P-51C-10 42-103796 was named JULIENNE HII in honour of the Californian high school that had raised sufficient war bonds to pay for its purchase. Once in the ETO, the Mustang was assigned to Lt John Montijo of the 353rd FS (USAAF)

'I started back up and noticed a plane levelled off 1000 to 2000 ft above the cloud deck. My first thought was that the second '190 had somehow survived, so I went down to finish him. It turned out to be an Me 109. I closed to zero deflection and moved in. The first burst tore pieces off the plane, and I saw strikes all over the canopy and fuselage. The canopy flew off, almost hitting me. It looked like the pilot was starting to get out when my next burst hit all over the canopy, where pieces were still coming off when I passed over him and to the side. I could see the pilot slumped over on one side of the cockpit. My wingman, Lt William Y Anderson, did a great job of covering my tail throughout the engagement.'

The 353rd FS's Capt Don Beerbower also claimed a Bf 109 during the course of the mission to raise his score to nine, and thus become the top ace of the 354th FG. Overall, the group chalked up an even dozen for the day (for the loss of T/Sgt Donald Dempsey of the 356th FG, one of five flying technical sergeants assigned to the group in March 1944), and then picked up another six victories when a return visit was made to Augsburg 48 hours later. Capt Beerbower claimed yet another Bf 109 on this occasion, as did squadronmate ILt Eagleston, whose score now stood at eight.

Following an uneventful mission to Frankfurt on 20 March, the 354th escorted bombers bound for Brunswick, and the city's Messerschmitt factories, three days later. The trip turned out to be more of a fighter sweep than anything else, and a number of Bf 109s appeared. In the ensuing battles the Mustang pilots claimed five destroyed, but at a cost of three of their own. There was no further scoring during the month.

March had seen an additional 31 victories added to the group's scoreboard, pushing the overall total of enemy aircraft destroyed in the air to date to over 150.

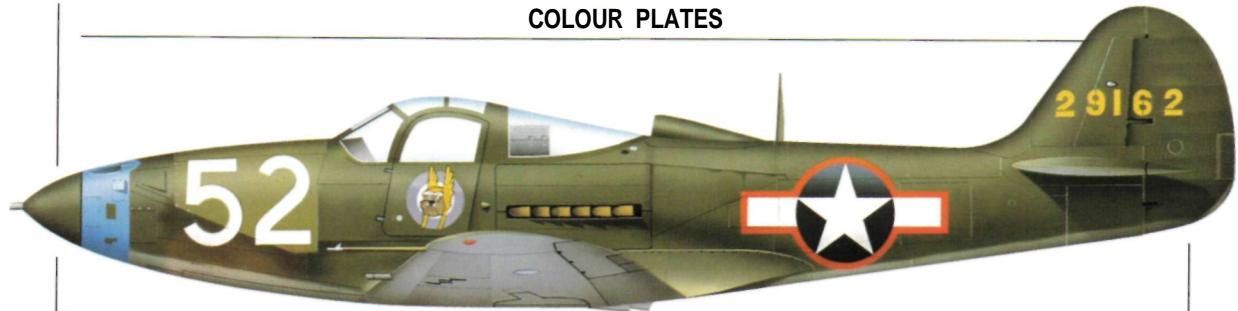
The 354th had not had it all its own way, however, with an escort mission to Schweinfurt on the 24th adding a further three casualties to the growing list of pilots that had either been killed, posted missing in action or were PoWs. Two of the pilots had collided whilst avoiding flak over the Dutch coast and one had been lost to unknown causes.

Lt Col Bickell then led a mission on 26 March that would provide a taste of what lay ahead for the group - the Mustangs went to Creil, in France, to dive-bomb a large marshalling yard. Some pilots enthusiastically embraced this type of mission, eagerly dropping their two 500 'pounders', while others stated that this was not their 'cup of tea'.

An escort mission to an airfield near Biarritz, in France, the following day wrapped up the historic month for the 354th. The group had overflown Berlin not once but several times during March 1944, and had played an important role in proving that the USAAF had wrested air supremacy from the Luftwaffe.



COLOUR PLATES



1
P-39N-1 42-9162 of the 355th FS, Portland, Oregon, September 1943



2
P-51B-1-NA 43-12173/ "Peg O'my Heart" of Maj George R Bickell, CO of the 355th FS, Boxted, December 1943



3
P-51B-5-NA 43-6764/Suga of Capt Charles W Lasko, 355th FS, Boxted, March 1944



4
P-51B-5-NA 43-6737/ "Peggy II" of 1Lt Gilbert F Talbot, 355th FS, Boxted, March 1944



5

P-51B-1-NA 43-12437/MY PET of the 356th FS, Boxted, March 1944



6

P-51B-1-NA 43-12451/LIVE BAIT of 1Lt Clayton Gross, 355th FS, Boxted, April 1944



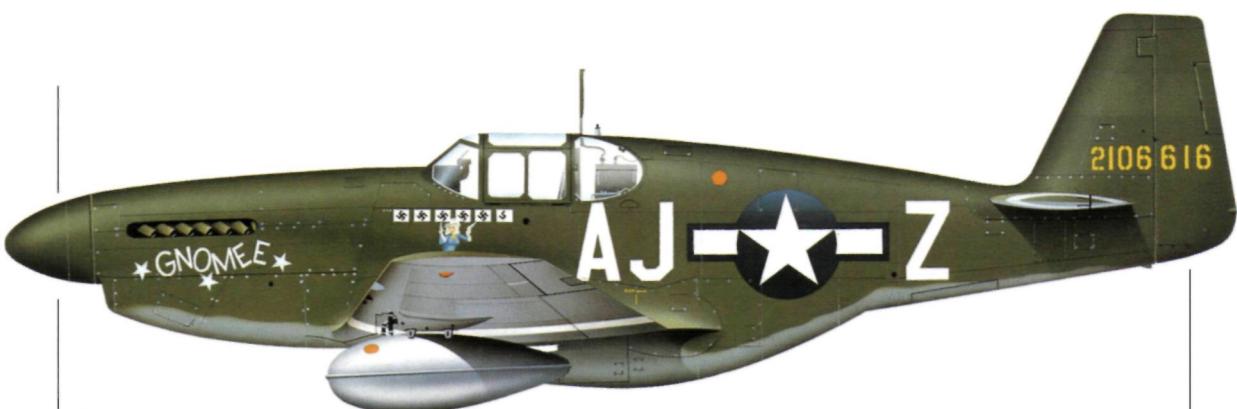
7

P-51B-5-NA 43-6322/ THE Verna Q of Capt Frank O'Connor, 356th FS, Lashenden, April 1944



8

P-51B-5-NA 43-6315/DING HAO! of Lt Col James Howard, CO of the 354th FG, Lashenden, April 1944



9

P-51B-10-NA 42-106616/GNOME of 2Lt Thomas F Miller, 356th FS, Lashenden, May 1944



10

P-51B-1-NA 43-12434/SHORT-FUSE SALLEE of Capt Richard Turner, CO of the 356th FS, Lashenden, May 1944



11

P-51B-1-NA 43-12152/KILLER of Capt Robert W Stephens, CO of the 355th FS, Lashenden, May 1944



12

P-51B-15-NA 42-106758/Easy Rockin' Mama of Lt James G Burke, 353rd FS, Lashenden, May 1944



13

P-51B-5-NA 43-6724/ATLANTA PEACH II of 2Lt William B King, 355th FS, Lashenden, late May 1944



14

P-51B-5-NA 43-6425//MARGIE MARU of Maj Jack T Bradley, CO of the 353rd FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, June 1944



15

P-51C-10-NT 42-103798/JULIENNE HI! of Lt John G Montijo Jr, 353rd FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, June 1944



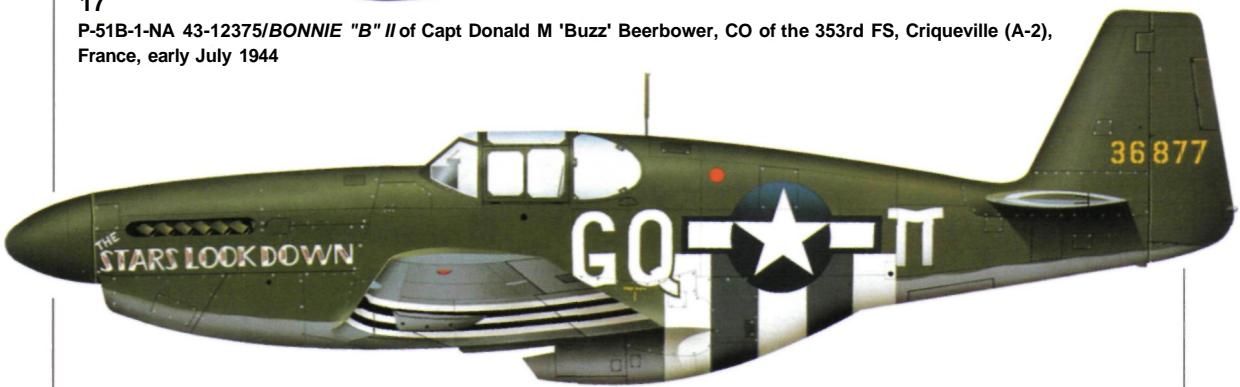
16

P-51B-7-NA 43-6833/Beantown Banshee of Capt Felix M Rogers, 353rd FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, June 1944



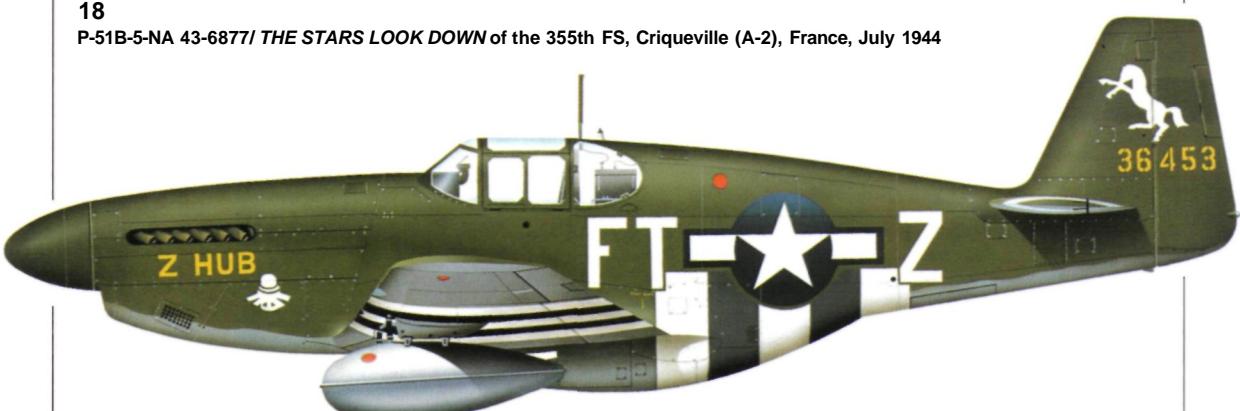
17

P-51B-1-NA 43-12375/BONNIE "B" II of Capt Donald M 'Buzz' Beerbower, CO of the 353rd FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, early July 1944



18

P-51B-5-NA 43-6877/ THE STARS LOOK DOWN of the 355th FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, July 1944



19

P-51B-5-NA 43-6453/Z HUB of 1Lt Carl G Bickel, 353rd FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, July 1944



20

P-51B-10-NA 42-106602/SHELLELAGH of 1Lt Kenneth H Dahlberg, 353rd FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, August 1944



21

P-51D-5-NA 44-13628 *BONNIE-B III* of 1Lt Carl Bickel, 353rd FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, August 1944



22

P-51D-5-NA 44-13383 *Swede's Steed III* of 1Lt William Y Anderson, 353rd FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, August 1944



23

P-51D-5-NA 44-13948/ARSONS REWARD of Maj Wallace N Emmer, 353rd FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, August 1944



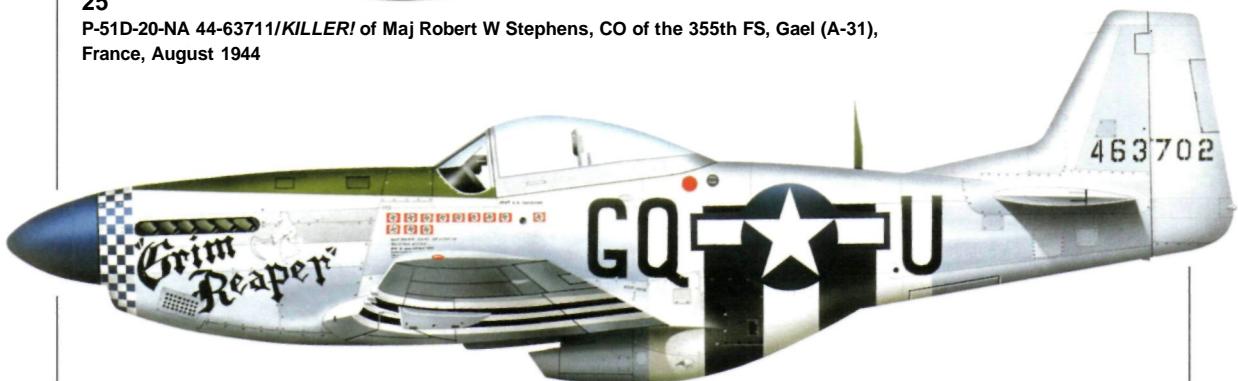
24

P-51D-5-NA 44-13551/*Little Horse* of 1Lt Charles W Koenig, 353rd FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, August 1944



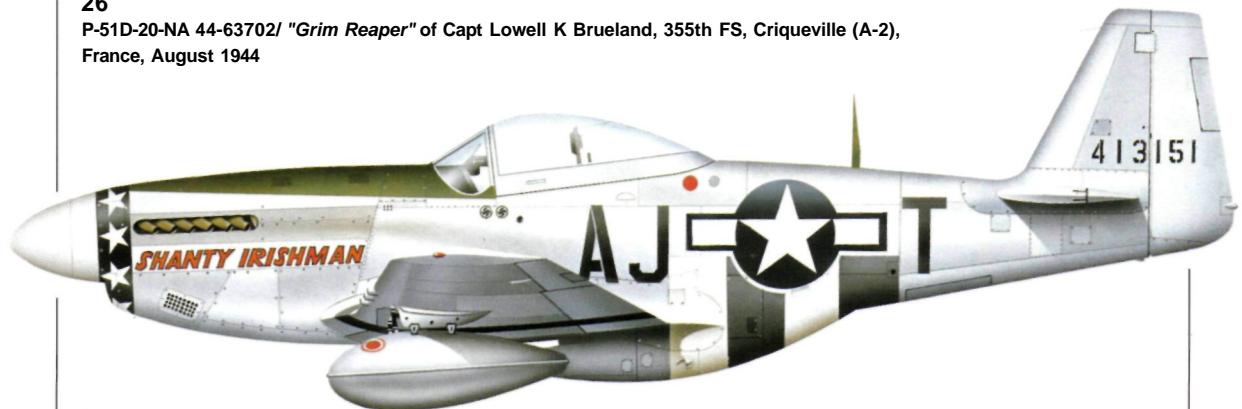
25

P-51D-20-NA 44-63711/*KILLER!* of Maj Robert W Stephens, CO of the 355th FS, Gael (A-31), France, August 1944



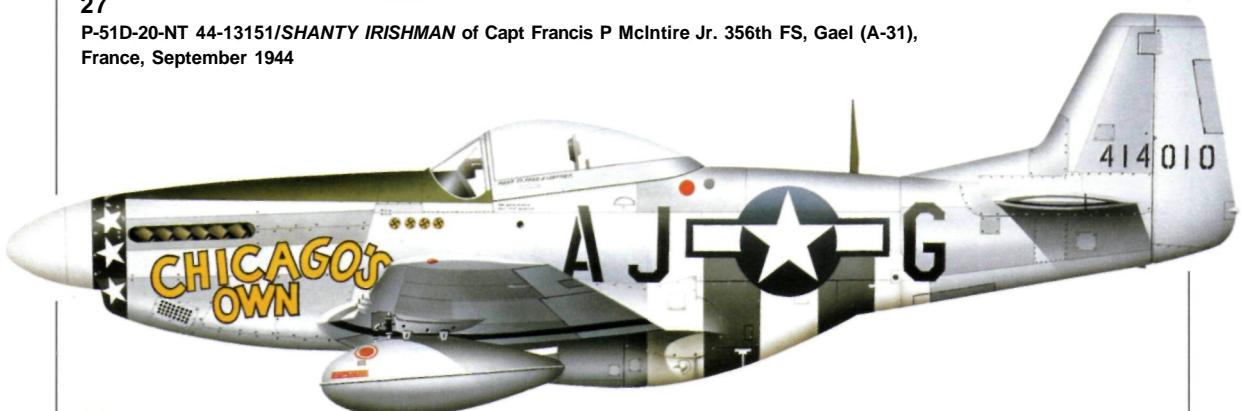
26

P-51D-20-NA 44-63702/ "Grim Reaper" of Capt Lowell K Brueland, 355th FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, August 1944



27

P-51D-20-NT 44-13151/*SHANTY IRISHMAN* of Capt Francis P McIntire Jr. 356th FS, Gael (A-31), France, September 1944



28

P-51D-5-NA 44-14010/*CHICAGO'S OWN* of Lt Frederick J Warner, 356th FS, Gael (A-31), France, September 1944



29

P-51D-5-NA 44-13581/The Prodigal Son of Lt Bartholomew C Tenore, 356th FS, Orconte (A-66)
France, October 1944



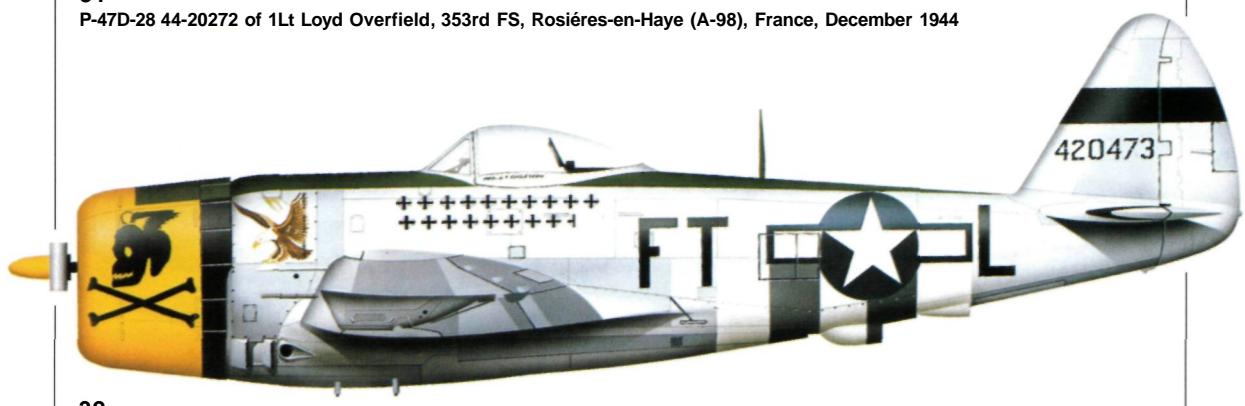
30

P-51D-5-NA 44-13693 Angels' Playmate of 2Lt Bruce W Carr, 353rd FS, Orconte (A-66) France, October 1944



31

P-47D-28 44-20272 of 1Lt Loyd Overfield, 353rd FS, Rosières-en-Haye (A-98), France, December 1944



32

P-47D-30 44-20473 of Maj Glenn Eagleston, CO of the 353rd FS, Rosières-en-Haye (A-98), France, December 1944



33

P-47D-30 44-20514/ *Wee Speck* of Capt Lowell K Brueland, 355th FS, Rosières-en-Haye (A-98), France, December 1944



34

P-47D-28 42-28750/ *LIVE BAIT* of Capt Clayton K Gross, 355th FS, Rosières-en-Haye (A-98), France, December 1944



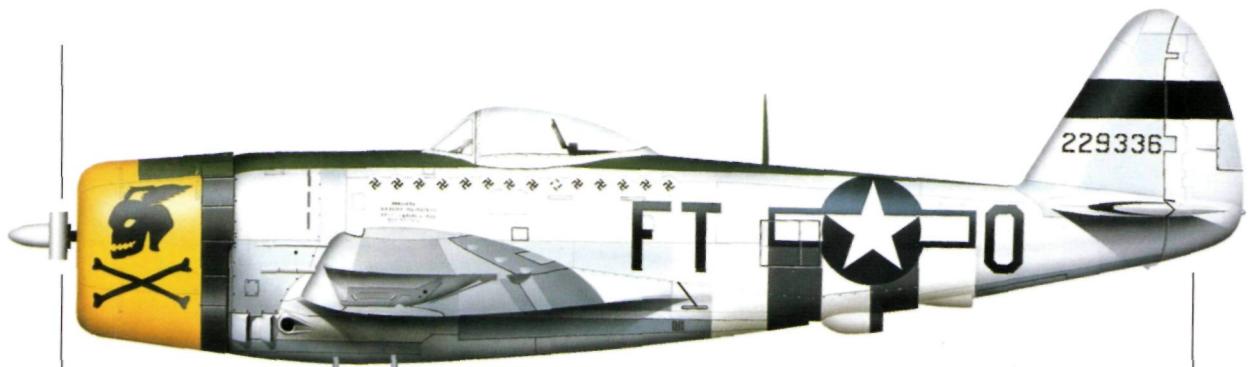
35

P-47D-28 42-28790/ *UNADILLA KILLA* of Lt Russell H Kline, 355th FS, Rosières-en-Haye (A-98), France, December 1944



36

P-47D-30 44-32760/ *"SHORTY" MIRIAM* of Lt Norman Davis, 356th FS, Rosières-en-Haye (A-98), France, December 1944



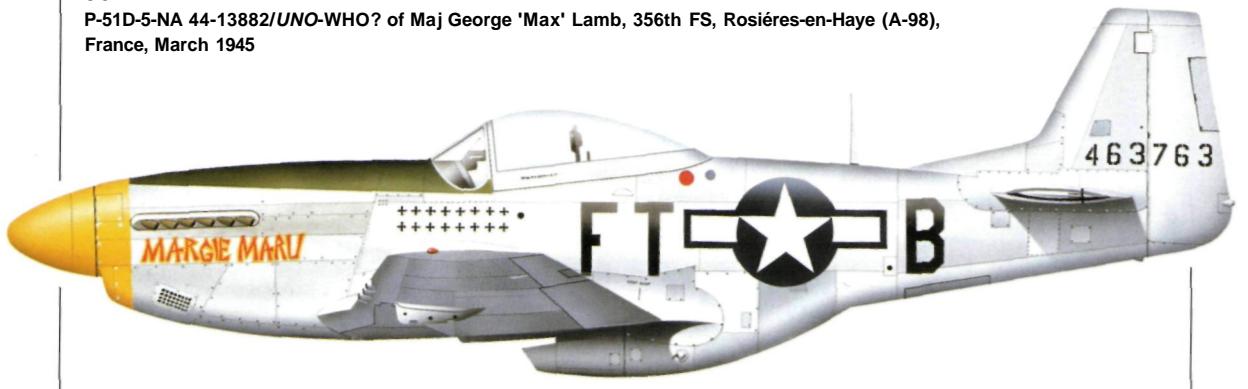
37

P-47D-28 42-29336 of Capt Kenneth H Dahlberg, 353rd FS, Rosières-en-Haye (A-98), France, December 1944



38

P-51D-5-NA 44-13882/UNO-WHO? of Maj George 'Max' Lamb, 356th FS, Rosières-en-Haye (A-98), France, March 1945



39

P-51D-20-NA 44-63763/MARGIE MARU of Lt Col Jack T Bradley, 354th FG HQ, Rosières-en-Haye (A-98), France, April 1945



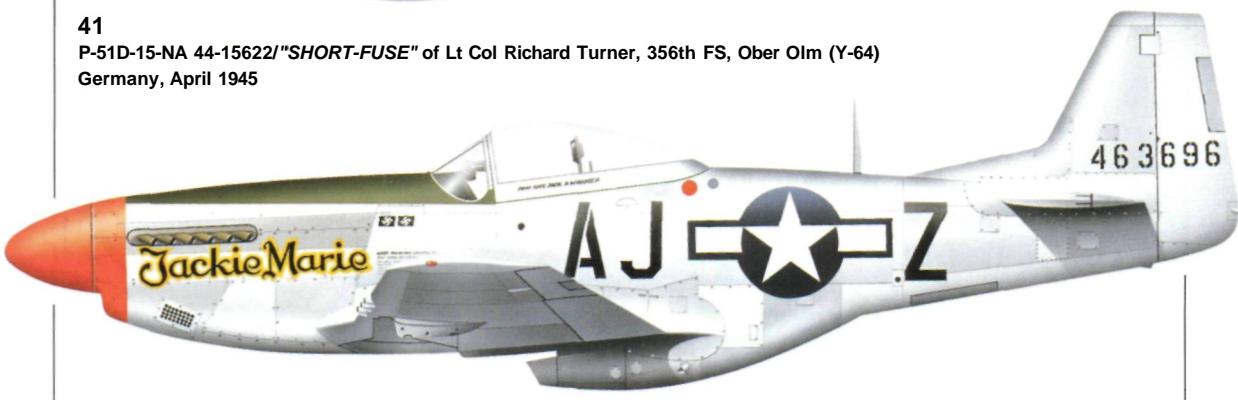
40

P-51D-20-NA 44-63607 of Lt Col Glenn T Eagleston, CO of the 353rd FS, Rosières-en-Haye (A-98), France, April 1945



41

P-51D-15-NA 44-15622/"SHORT-FUSE" of Lt Col Richard Turner, 356th FS, Ober Olm (Y-64)
Germany, April 1945



42

P-51D-20-NA 44-63696/Jackie Marie of Capt Jack A Warner, 356th FS, Ansbach (R-45), Germany, May 1945



43

P-51D-20-NA 44-63702/ WEE SPECK of Maj Lowell K Brueland, 355th FS, Ansbach (R-45),
Germany, May 1945



44

Fieseler Fi 156 Storch of the 354th FG, Ansbach (R-45), Germany, May 1945

UNIT HERALDRY



1
354th Fighter Group



2
353rd Fighter Squadron



3
355th Fighter Squadron



4
356th Fighter Squadron

COMMAND CHANGES AND OUTDOOR LIFE

On 1 April 1944 the 354th FG was part of a 475-strong fighter escort sortied in support of 440 bombers that had been sent to attack a chemical plant in Ludwigshafen. All 245 B-17s of the 3rd Bomb Division were recalled, however, after encountering thick cloud over France, and the 195 B-24s of the 2nd Bomb Division that supposedly released their ordnance over the target did so 100 miles south of Ludwigshafen due to pathfinder force equipment failure, and resulting navigational errors! This resulted in cities in France and neutral Switzerland being bombed, and the latter country was subsequently paid \$ 1,000,000 by the US government as part of a formal apology.

Few enemy fighters were encountered due to the bombers being way off course, although one flight from the 353rd FS got mixed up with a group of Bf 109s. Several fights took place and two enemy fighters were downed.

With more bad weather moving in over the next few days, cancelling virtually all missions, the most important item of discussion at Boxted was the group's impending move to the Advanced Landing Ground (ALG) at Lashenden, in Kent, which was sited between the county town of Maidstone and Ashford. There were to be no more paved runways, Nissen huts and heated structures. Instead, all personnel were to move into tents, all supply and messing was to be carried out in field conditions and the aircraft were to operate off steel matting. Preparations for the invasion were certainly underway.

On 5 April the Mustangs sortied to France to attack enemy airfields. Bombs were dropped, installations were strafed at Orleans and Bourges and six aircraft were deemed to have been destroyed on the ground for the loss of a single P-51, and its pilot, to flak. Leading the 356th FS on this mission was Capt Turner, who recounted in his autobiography;

'We took off on a fighter sweep of Luftwaffe airfields in Châteauroux, Conches, Chartres and Bourges. At a point central to the targets the group separated, and I led my squadron to hit Bourges. Twenty miles from the target I instructed Green flight to fly over Bourges at 10,000 ft as top cover, and deployed Red and Blue flights on courses at deck level so they could hit from three different directions at one-minute intervals.

P-51B-15 42-106897 *RIGOR MORTIS*,
coded 'FT-V' was the regular mount
of Lt Eddie Regis of the 353rd FS
during the summer of 1944





I hit the field first with Red flight, and caught a landing ME-410, hitting him on the landing roll and causing him to burst into flames, leaving a trail of debris down the runway. Banking round after my first pass, I dived on a ME-110 being serviced on a hardstand, starting a raging fire beneath him as my incendiaries, and those of my wingman, ignited the gasoline spilling from his tanks.

Pulling up again, I rolled over and down on another twin-engined aircraft poised at the edge of the field with props revving for take-off. The burst from my "fifties" chewed into him at perfect range, and he blew up. Calling the squadron, I told everyone to climb back up to 15,000 ft and rendezvous ten miles north-west of Bourges.

Following this mission we were all convinced of one thing - that it was a lot more difficult to attack German aircraft on the ground than in a nice uncomplicated air fight.'

A few days later the group realised that command changes were in the offing when the 355th's CO, Lt Col Bickell, was appointed Deputy Group Commander. Capt Robert Stephens took over the reins of the unit. The following day 'Big Jim' Howard pinned on the eagles of a full colonel.

Col Howard led the group accompanying 664 bombers that were sent

Capt Bob Stephens' P-51B-1 43-12152 KILLER undergoes an engine test run at Lashenden in May 1944, with crew chief, M/Sgt Ralph Mathieson, in the cockpit. CO of the 355th FS, Stephens used this Mustang to claim a number of kills during the first half of 1944 (USAAF)

Lt W R Perkins of the 356th FS was the primary pilot of *ANGEL FROM HELL*. Perkins was later killed on 13 June 1944 when he hit a tree whilst strafing trucks in France (USAAF)



to attack Brunswick on 8 April. The mixed force of B-17s and B-24s from three bomb divisions was attacked by 60+ Fw 190s and more than 15 Bf 109s in the vicinity of Wittingen, and Maj Jack Bradley later reported;

'They pounced from above like rain. I saw six of them below me and dove down at full throttle, pouring lead at them as I plunged through their formation. One "firecrackered" in mid-air, the pilot floating down in a 'chute.'

Bradley got another almost immediately, and pulled in on a third that seemingly never saw the Mustang on his tail. Capt Don Beerbower also claimed three that day, destroying two Fw 190s and a Bf 109. Overall, the 353rd FS was credited with a dozen enemy fighters shot down.

Col Howard went down on an Fw 190, and as he attacked, another Focke-Wulf fighter tried to come up under him and his wingman. Lt Robert Shoup saw this and dropped down on its tail. The future 5.5-kill ace was spotted, however, for the Fw 190 broke for the deck. Shoup managed to stay with him, scoring as they rushed earthwards. At about 5000 ft the Fw 190 went into a spin, which continued until it crashed.

When the day's total was added up, the 354th had scored a confirmed 20 victories, with several more probables and damaged. Four pilots did not return from the air battle, one of them as a result of a mid-air collision with a Bf 109.

Howard led the group again the next day, this time to help bring home B-17s and B-24s from Marienberg and Gdynia, where they had bombed aircraft factories. The 354th picked up the 'heavies' as they headed west, and encountered a number of attacking enemy fighters en route.

Lt Shoup and his flight ran into ten Fw 190s that were determined to get to the B-17s, and they dispersed them. Shoup downed one and then sighted a straggling bomber under attack, but it was too late to save it. As he dived down to drive an Fw 190 off, four men bailed out of the Flying Fortress. The now defenceless B-17 dropped lower and lower until a series

Parked on the 355th FS's loop hardstanding on the south side of Lodge Lane at Boxted in early April 1944, Lt Gilbert Talbot's "Peggy II" has its port wing magazines replenished with belted 0.50-calibre ammunition. Within days of this photograph being taken, "Peggy II" was lost in action with Lt James Campbell at the controls on 8 April 1944, the pilot being killed. The 354th FG was escorting bombers to Brunswick at the time, and although the group claimed 20 enemy aircraft shot down, four P-51s were lost. Five-kill ace Gil Talbot had earlier claimed his first victory (an Me 410) in this machine on 10 February 1944 (USAAF)





P-51C-1 42-102997 was photographed on a sunny day undergoing major engine maintenance at Lashenden in late April 1944. The groundcrew must have done a good job as this aircraft saw considerable action with the 354th, serving for a time with the 355th FS and then being transferred to the 356th FS. Here, the fighter (re-coded 'AJ-S' and christened *Fer de Lance*) became the mount of five-kill ace Lt Bob Shoup, and he was shot down in it during an escort mission to Leipzig on 12 May 1944 (USAAF)

The ingenuity of USAAF groundcrews was legendary, these 355th FS personnel rigging up a heated shelter at the Lashenden ALG in order to ward off the cold (USAAF)



of telling bursts from the Focke-Wulf fighter caused the bomber to veer off to the left, wing over and crash. Shoup was by now rapidly closing on the tail of the victorious Fw 190, and when he overran the German fighter he found himself looking down into its cockpit. His opponent was frantically searching the sky to the left and right of him for the P-51, which he knew was behind him somewhere, but the Fw 190 pilot apparently never saw Shoup directly above him!

The Mustang ace throttled back, moved in behind the Fw 190's tail

and fired a long burst, no deflection needed. The enemy aircraft bounced off the ground a couple of times and then cartwheeled across a field and burst into flames. Shoup was the highest scorer of the day with two kills, whilst eight other pilots from the 354th claimed singles.

On 10 April the 354th flew two missions in a day for the first time, the second of these seeing the group escort Martin B-26 medium bombers to their targets, which was also another first. In the morning, the group had sent bomb-toting Mustangs to attack a marshallalling yard in the Belgian town of Hasselt. The group returned to Belgium that afternoon when the Ninth Air Force B-26s headed for the railyards at Namur. A Luftwaffe force of some 20 fighters attempted to attack the bombers from the rear, but the 354th intervened and downed five of them. The 356th's Lt Robert Goodnight was the most successful pilot of the day, claiming an Fw 190 and a Bf 109 to take his score to 7.25 kills.

The 354th flew its longest escort mission to date on 11 April when it escorted 341 B-17s of the 1st Bomb Division to Sorau and Cottbus airfields, just east of the Polish border. The round trip was almost 1300

miles in length, meaning that the P-51 pilots faced more than five hours in the cockpit.

No enemy opposition was encountered over the targets, but on the way home three Bf 109s made a fleeting pass at the bombers near Wittenberg. Capt Turner chased after them and promptly shot two of the Messerschmitts down as they prepared to land at their airfield. He and his flight then proceeded to strafe the base, destroying three Henschel Hs 129s on the ground. In return, two P-51s were destroyed, with the loss of both pilots. One fell to flak and the other had had his Mustang so badly shot up by enemy

fighters that he could not make it all the way home.

The following day Col Howard led the group to Leipzig, but the mission was ruined by very bad weather, which prevented a proper rendezvous. Lts Robert Meserve and Pat Moran shared an Fw 190 for the 354th's only claim of the day.

13 April was a very active day for the 354th. Lt Col Bickell was to have led the Mustangs to Schweinfurt, but engine trouble turned him back and Capt Maurice Long of the 355th FS took over. Shortly after the group had rendezvoused with 172 B-17s

from the 1st Bomb Division, the Luftwaffe arrived in force. Lt William Y Anderson was flying wing to Lt Glenn Eagleston as part of the 353rd FS's Red flight, and recalled the action;

Following rendezvous, the lead box of bombers was tapped by 40 Fw 190s, which came in high and head-on. Lt Eagleston fired at one and I saw a strike on the wing root of an Fw 190. I also fired, but saw no strikes as my aircraft had an oil leak and my windscreens were completely covered. The Fw 190s which we met head-on returned fire but did not hit us. They were firing 20 mm stuff, and it exploded over and around us. Lt Eagleston and I then orbited to the right, and we had made about a 180-degree turn when Lt Eagleston went down on two Fw 190s which were at three o'clock to us. He was drawing in to fire while I covered, and two Fw 190s came in on his tail. I called "break" so he had to break off the attack.

'We then returned to the bombers and saw about 25+ fighters come through the second box and start in on the third box when we met them head-on and broke up their attack. All of them went down except two, which started climbing. After climbing for about three minutes, Lt Eagleston caught up with the second Fw 190 of the two-ship formation and fired. I saw strikes on the canopy, engine and wings. The Fw 190 then bunted and Lt Eagleston followed and fired again. The canopy came off and all kinds of debris flew out of the cockpit, followed by the pilot, who bailed out.

The other Fw 190, meanwhile, was still circling and watching us beaver his buddy, and trying to get into a position to tap us, but before he had a chance we were back up again and cutting inside of him. Lt Eagleston's blower was out so he couldn't quite reach a firing position, so I opened up wide and got on the



Stripped of its Olive Drab paint in the late spring of 1944, P-51B-10 43-7136 was one of the first natural metal Mustangs to serve with the 355th FG (USAAF)

Future CO of the 355th FS, Capt Maurice G Long poses with his P-51B, "Mary Pat II" (sub-type and serial unknown), which he named for his wife. An original member of the 354th FG, Long finished his tour of duty in the ETO in October 1944, having claimed 5.5 kills (USAAF)





Known to all and sundry within the 354th as 'Uncle', Lt Col George Bickell assumed command of the group after Col Jim Howard departed in mid April 1944 for Ninth Air Force Headquarters. Of diminutive stature (the complete opposite to his predecessor, who was 6 ft 3 in tall!), Bickell was a natural leader of men both on the ground and in the air. A veteran of combat in the Pacific, he remained at the head of the 354th until May 1945 (USAAF)

Fw 190s tail. He must have been watching Lt Eagleston, for I don't believe he saw me until I cut across the circle we were making and I fired from about 45 to 50 degrees deflection. I saw strikes on the engine and canopy, and the Fw 190 flipped over in a steep spiral. I followed him down and kept firing, but saw no strikes. He was smoking badly so I just followed, and at 4000 ft he started spinning violently. I began to pull out in order to keep from going in with him, levelling out at 2000 ft. I went into a climbing turn and saw wreckage of an enemy aircraft in a small wooded area below.'

The two Mustang pilots headed for home at low level, managing to set fire to a Me 410 that they ran across on an airfield along the way.

A total of 13 victories had been scored, with Capts Charles Lasko and Frank O'Connor and Lt Mailon Gillis all getting doubles. Two pilots were lost in the air battles.

The group was not surprised to get an announcement at this time that Col Jim Howard was being moved

up to Ninth Air Force Headquarters effective from 11 April. Also as expected, Lt Col Bickell, known to his men as 'Uncle' George, was appointed the new commander of the 354th FG.

A costly fighter sweep was flown on 15 April, with 616 aircraft from 16 groups being given the job of strafing airfields in central and western Germany - the 354th FG was slated to hit Rostock. Winds aloft were gusting at up to 100 miles per hour over the North Sea, and numerous groups aborted as their fighters became scattered all over the sky. Very little damage was done by those aircraft that made it to Germany, and no fewer than 19 fighters were lost due to the weather. Three of those belonged to the 354th FG, the trio of pilots being listed as Missing in Action.

This would prove to be the last mission flown by the 354th FG from Boxted, as with bad weather continuing to put operations on hold, the group instead devoted its full attention to moving its aircraft and equipment to its new home at Lashenden. The 'Pioneer Mustang Group' had flown some 55 missions from Boxted, and 47 P-51s had been recorded as missing in action, compared with claims of 169 enemy aircraft shot down.

By mid April the ground echelon had already moved to Lashenden, setting up tents and putting necessary outdoor furnishings in place, and on the 17th IX Fighter Command decreed that it was time to fly the Mustangs in. One squadron had left by mid-afternoon, and as it had made the trip successfully, so a second squadron was despatched. However, the weather



had by now taken a turn for the worse, and the pilots could not find their new field. Running low on fuel, they were forced to land wherever they could when they discovered that Boxted was 'socked in'. Late that afternoon the third squadron took off and was able to arrive safely.

The 354th's first two missions from its new base befit its surroundings, as they were of a tactical nature - one dive-bombing in Belgium and the other a fighter sweep over Germany. Both saw no aerial action.

The primary discussion within the 354th was now its new base. With no frills and comforts, some of the men said it was more like a 'boy scout camp'. However, there were added attractions, for a bus ran right by the base en route to Maidstone, which the men immediately took a liking to. All personnel, officers and enlisted men alike, were quartered in six-man tents, and had to endure cold showers and outdoor latrines. The runway and 'hardstands' consisted of heavy-gauge chicken wire, fastened down to mats. All in all things were not too bad until it rained, then the mud became a big problem. Richard Turner remembers;

'On the 17th we had flown our planes to the new air strip, and a "strip" it was! Its surface was made of the new metal interlocking strips which were laid down over quickly compacted earth. These strips were fine for normal operations, but were deadly when wet. If you applied too much power suddenly on the wet metal during taxiing and take-off, the torque force of the prop could neatly swing you 90 degrees away from your intended path. We also exchanged our comfortable huts for foxholes until tents were set up. More than ever now it was evident that we were being groomed for things to come, for the long-awaited Invasion, we hoped.'

Bomber escort duties were resumed on 24 April with a trip to Munich, the Luftwaffe being met on two occasions and the 354th returning home with four victories and no losses.

Soon after arriving at Lashenden, the 354th welcomed newly promoted Lt Col Charles Teschner as its new Deputy Group Commander. He had transferred in from the P-47-equipped 362nd FG (where he had led the 378th FS), based just a few miles away at Headcorn ALG. Teschner's initiation into the 354th came when he was elected to lead the group on an escort mission to Mannheim on the 25th. Upon its return, the 354th strafed an airfield and claimed 17 aircraft destroyed. Only one enemy

Two spotless 355th FS P-51B-10s are prepared for their next mission from Lashenden in May 1944. Judging by the two 500 'pounders' sat on racks in the foreground, it would be safe to say that the squadron was soon to depart on a dive-bombing mission to the low countries. The aircraft in the foreground was assigned to 5.5-kill ace Lt William King, and it carried the name *ATLANTA PEACH* on its port forward fuselage - see the photograph on the bottom of page 60. The Mustang in the distance (42-106445) was also assigned to a 355th FS ace, namely Capt Warren 'Red' Emerson (USAAF)

One of the 354th FG's first aces, Maj Richard Turner finished his tour in the ETO as both CO and top scoring pilot of the 356th FS (USAAF)





A scene that would be repeated hundreds of times over during the 354th FG's 18 months in combat in the ETO. This doomed rocket-armed Bf 109G has been caught by the gun camera fitted to an anonymous P-51B in the spring of 1944. The camera would automatically start filming as soon as the aircraft's 'fifties' were fired (USAAF)

fighter was shot down, however, and two pilots were lost on the mission.

One of those missing was six-kill ace Lt William Simmons of the 355th FS, whose P-51B-1 43-12486 was struck by flak near Ansbach, in Germany. Although he was seen to bail out, word reached the group that Simmons' body had been found near the wreckage of his fighter.

Recently promoted Maj Richard Turner led the group to Brunswick on the 26th, and the mission would prove costly for the 354th. High winds aloft and 10/10ths undercast

below made navigation difficult, and the bombers were never found. Lt Edward Regis was lost to flak and Lt Franklin Hendrickson was forced back due to a bad engine, with Lt Joseph Lilly sent along as his escort. Neither pilot returned, but Hendrickson made it back months later and Lilly became a PoW.

Two more pilots almost did not make it home. Lts Mailon Gillis and Leonard Jackson had become lost, and when Maj Turner returned to base and learned that they were missing, he had his fighter hastily refuelled and took off to search for them. Although he experienced some difficulty himself, he finally contacted the men over the radio as they flew over the Brest Peninsula, heading for Spain! He succeeded in turning them round and guiding them back to Gosport, on the Hampshire coast, where they landed after having been in the air for eight-and-a-half hours.

Realising that time was of the essence, and having taken off in search of his lost squadronmates before being given formal approval for the sortie, Turner was initially reprimanded by IX Fighter Command HQ:

'Under the circumstances I would have been happy in view of the results to take a bust in rank. Later the reprimand was reversed, and instead they awarded me a cluster to my Distinguished Flying Cross for my action in this affair.'

Two dive-bombing missions were flown on 27 April, and 48 hours later Col Howard returned to lead the group on an escort mission to Berlin. A formation of 30 Bf 109s were initially encountered, followed by 60 Fw 190s. Capt Glenn Eagleston quickly became involved in a skirmish when the Messerschmitts arrived on the scene and broke into two sections. Capt Don Beerbower and his flight engaged one section while Eagleston and his wingman, along with the remnants of their flight, took on a gaggle of about 11 aircraft. Eagleston reported:

'The E/A, which were still together, broke into us while we were still in formation, and I fired a one-second burst at 90 degrees and saw damaging strikes on one 109. After a few more turns I was in position to fire at the last E/A and did so, firing a two-second burst from 20 degrees, scoring many hits. The E/A started smoking badly, and then broke up and into me. The E/A did a complete loop and I fired at the top of it, scoring a few more strikes, after which he straightened out and jettisoned his canopy. I thought he was going to bail out, so I pulled out to one side. Instead, he



One of the most photographed Mustangs to serve with the 356th FS/354th FG in the spring of 1944 was 2Lt Thomas 'Gnomee' Miller's P-51B-10 42-106616 *GNOME*. In this particular shot (taken without Miller present), Capt Bob Stephens 'tells some of the boys how it is done' following one of his victories. His audience comprises Lts Lyn Cocker and Lewis Powers, along with Flight Surgeon Lt Gwyn Start. Powers, in particular, must have paid close attention to what 13-kill ace Stephens had to say, for he would make 11 claims (including 2.5 aerial victories) during a long and productive tour which lasted from May to December 1944 (USAAF)



Tommy Miller happened to be around when this posed shot was taken at Lashenden on 26 April 1944. Having scored the last of his 5.25 kills 17 days earlier, and with his victory tally having been brought fully up to date, Miller shakes hands with his faithful crew chief, Sgt E R Wirkkala. 'Gnomee' Miller was later shot down by flak in this very machine on 7 August 1944, and he spent time in a German military hospital near Paris before being liberated later that same month (USAAF)



Sgt E R Wirkkala takes a break from preparing *GNOME* for its next mission. The 75 US gallon drop tanks indicate that the group will be going deep into enemy territory. Tommy Miller scored 4.25 of his 5.25 kills in this machine between 20 February and 9 April 1944 (W Louie)

headed for the clouds, attempting to get away. I followed him down and fired another burst, scoring a few strikes. By this time we were down to around 1000 ft, and the pilot bailed out, striking the tail surfaces as he went. His 'chute failed to open.'

Six fighters fell to the guns of the 354th, but the group lost three pilots in return. While engaged with the Luftwaffe, the Mustang pilots noted that the German fighters made repeated overhead attacks at the bombers, before zooming back up to altitude and then renewing their offensive. This new tactic seemed to work quite well at the expense of the bombers, 63 of which were lost to all causes during the mission — 13 USAAF fighters were also destroyed.

An uneventful escort mission to Lyon, in France, on the 30 April wrapped up yet another memorable month for the 354th FG. Its pilots had continued to score heavily, with their tally of kills now exceeding 250, for the loss of 56 pilots. The 354th had also changed bases in what was its first step to becoming more of a tactical fighter group in preparation for the invasion of the Continent, and an eventual move there.

PREPARING FOR INVASION

May brought about more tactical missions aimed at airfields, bridges and troop installations in the occupied countries of Europe. On the first two days of the month four dive-bombing missions — two in Belgium, one in Holland and one in France - were flown. The first escort mission did not come until the 4th, when Lt Col Bickell led the Mustangs to Berlin once again. No opposition was encountered over the target, so a fighter sweep



Lt James G Burke and his entire three-man groundcrew (crew chief, assistant crew chief and armourer) pause for a group photograph just prior to the pilot climbing aboard 'their' Mustang, P-51B-15 42-106758 *Easy Rockin'-Mama*. Burke, who was assigned to the 353rd FS, claimed three enemy aircraft damaged during the course of his tour (W Louie)

An unidentified pilot steps into P-51B-5 43-6369 at Lashenden in April 1944. The fighter's white nose and tail stripes have been removed, but those on the horizontal surfaces remain. These were applied in late 1943 in an effort to make P-51s easily identifiable, but they did little to prevent P-47s from attacking (USAF)



P-51B-1 43-12199 Miss "Ei", coded 'AJ-H', was flown by Lt George W 'Stud' Hall of the 356th FS. One of the original squadron pilots to come over to the ETO with the 354th FG in November 1943, he was shot down during an escort mission to Schweinfurt on 13 April 1944. Hall's CO, Richard Turner, remembers;

'Old Stud had been in our original cadre of pilots in the 356th, and his loss was especially hard for the old-timers among us to take. He had been a dependable fighter pilot, and had contributed much to the aggressive atmosphere and spirit of the squadron. It was reported that while going down over Germany, Stud was reeling off a list of debts owed to friends before bailing out. Whether true or not, it was just the kind of stunt Stud would have pulled in the face of danger and death'
(USAAF)

was made on the return flight, and only a solitary Fw 190 was attacked and shot down by Capt Frank O'Connor. This proved to be 'Pinky' O'Connor's final victory, taking his tally to 10.75 kills, and making him the 356th FS's then ranking ace. Indeed, his tally would only eventually be bettered - by 0.25 of a kill - by long-time squadron CO, Richard Turner.

A further two missions were flown to Berlin on 7 and 8 May. The earlier one was largely uneventful, with no hits and no losses as far as the Luftwaffe was concerned. Some opposition was encountered the following day, however, and Capt Eagleston experienced a combat which was a real heartbreaker for an escort pilot. He reported;

'Capt Jack Bradley ordered me to accompany an aborting B-17 back out when we were in the Berlin area. Time was 1100 hrs. I escorted the "big friend" until 1200 hrs, and we were in the Nienburg area when four Me 109s came in at six o'clock, 3000 ft above us. I climbed up to engage and instructed my wingman, Lt Charles W Koenig, to stay low with the bomber. I engaged the last E/A, which broke into me and split for the deck. I was attempting to head off the other three E/A when twelve Fw 190s made a head-on pass at the bomber, scoring many strikes. We attempted to ward off this attack too, but it was hopeless. Seven 'chutes were seen to leave the bomber. The gaggle broke to the right with the exception of one, which made a turn to the left. When we made our attack from astern, this E/A turned onto Lt Koenig's tail. I called a break right to him and he did so. His break took him beneath the clouds and we became separated.'

'I attacked the gaggle from astern, firing two-second bursts, and seeing strikes on the last '190. The major part of the strikes were on the right side





P-51Bs assemble at the end of runway 11-29 at Lashenden in preparation for a group take-off on 15 May 1944. According to the 354th's operational records, no combat missions were flown on this date, so these machines must have been departing on a group-strength training flight. The two silver Mustangs are 42-106434 *ATLANTA PEACH*, flown by Lt William King, and 42-106445, assigned to Capt Warren 'Red' Emerson. These are the only 355th FS machines visible in this view, as the remaining nine Mustangs all belong to the 356th FS. The P-51B in the right foreground is Capt Frank O'Connor's *THE VERA Q* (43-6322), while the fighter to its right is Lt W R Perkins' *ANGEL FROM HELL*. The groundcrewman sat on the port wing of each Mustang acted as the pilot's guide, for the long nose of the fighter obstructed the view ahead when the aircraft was in the tail-down position. (USAAF)

of the fuselage and cockpit. A minor explosion took place and several pieces flew off. I fired a one-second burst, scoring strikes on the left wing. About one-and-a-half feet of wingtip disintegrated and the E/A rolled to the left, smoking badly. I followed it down and fired another short burst, scoring a few more strikes. The E/A went straight into the ground and crashed. I pulled out at 2000 ft and climbed back up to 12,000 ft, attempting to attack the gaggle again. The Fw 190s broke in several directions and were coming at me from all angles, so I dove to the deck, flew for about ten minutes, regained altitude and went home.'

Three Bf 109s were downed by the Mustangs during the mission, which cost the 354th one pilot.

A short escort trip over Belgium on 9 May saw a few enemy fighters engaged in the target area, but it was not until the P-51s turned for home that they met four Fw 190s and downed two of them.

Capt Maurice Long led the group to Saarbrucken on the 11th, where the presence of the bombers provoked the Luftwaffe into action. More than 50 Bf 109s and Fw 190s formed up and began following the bombers. The P-51s climbed up to their altitude and combat ensued until the majority of them had been broken up and chased off in all directions.

An original 355th FS pilot, Lt Clayton K Gross flew at least five fighters (four Mustangs and a Thunderbolt) named *LIVE BAIT*. This sobriquet came about when some of his squadronmates wanted to use him to bait the Luftwaffe by having him fly alone below them! As previously mentioned, Gross would complete two tours with the 355th, flying some 105 combat missions and scoring six kills, the last of which was an Me 262 (USAAF)



Lt Robert Welden was leading his flight when, 11 minutes off target, nine Fw 190s and 14 Bf 109s were seen flying a course parallel, and some 3000 ft above, the box of bombers he was escorting. The Fw 190s came almost abreast of the B-17s before turning to make a broadside attack on the bombers. They then dove, came within 1000 yards of the bombers and pulled up. Welden radioed the flight behind him to tell them that he was engaging the Fw 190s, and that they should in turn take on the Bf 109s. Welden stated;

'I did a 180-degree turn with my flight and came in behind the '190s, but due to their superior speed at the time, I had to open fire at approximately 900 yards in an attempt to scare them off the "Forts". The last three E/A did break down, but six continued the attack.

'As I closed on the last E/A's tail and fired a burst, the gaggle broke left and down. I observed no strikes at the time. I closed to 300 yards in a tight turn to the left and fired a short burst, getting strikes on its left wing and tail. The '190 reversed his turn and I gave him another squirt, seeing more hits on the cowling and canopy. The E/A began to smoke a great deal and pieces flew off. At 100 yards, going straight down, I fired about a two-second burst into the E/A's fuselage, getting many strikes - I watched the E/A go down in an uncontrolled dive and crash into the ground.'



Lt Robert Welden of the 356th FS named his P-51B-1 43-12172 *MACKIE THE 3rd* after his wife Maxine. The fighter had originally been assigned to Lt 'Willie Y' Anderson of the 353rd FS, who had named it *Swede's Steed*. Taken on 1 May 1944, this photograph was run on the cover of *Life* magazine (USAAF)

P-51B-1 43-12213 *Mary Anne* was the mount of 7.25-kill ace Lt Robert Goodnight of the 356th FS (USAAF)



Totals for the day were 11 confirmed victories for the loss of one Mustang. Veteran 355th FS pilot Lt Clayton Gross was the top scorer with two Bf 109s destroyed.

The 354th travelled to Leipzig the following day, and ran into small numbers of fighters but no big gaggles. Six aircraft were nevertheless shot down, with Capt Jack Bradley scoring victories ten and eleven. The 356th FS suffered the loss of 5.5-kill ace Lt Bob Shoup on this mission (his 60th), however, and he sat out the rest of the conflict as a PoW.

Lt Col Bickell led the group on 13 May on what was the longest escort mission for a P-51 to date. 289

B-17s of the 1st Bomb Division went after an oil refinery at Politz, near the port of Stettin on the Baltic Sea coast — the total round trip was over 1400 miles. Just before rendezvousing with the bombers, the 354th spotted 50+ Bf 109s heading away from the bomber stream. Bickell knew better than to fall into their trap, and instead stayed with the 'Big Friends'.

Minutes later the bombers were attacked by 75 single-engined fighters north of Denham. The 354th engaged just as another 30 German fighters joined in the fight near Lübeck. During a series of swirling dogfights the Mustang pilots were successful in downing ten enemy fighters for the loss of just one of their own. The top scorer was the 353rd's Lt Carl Frantz, whose haul of three Bf 109s (and a fourth damaged) boosted his overall tally to ten, while Lt Col Bickell and Capts Emmer and Brueland all claimed doubles.

'Brue' Brueland also had to make a rescue. Squadronmate Capt Clayton Gross had been viciously attacked by two red-nosed P-47s, leaving his P-51B badly damaged. Brueland heard his call for help and finally found him, whereupon he flew close escort for the irate Mustang pilot all the way back to Lashenden.

The following day saw another advance in preparations for the group's eventual transfer to the Continent. The now familiar six-man tents were struck and all personnel had to move into two-man pup tents. Excess clothing and personal effects were also boxed up to be sent home, and officers' 'pinks and greens' (dress uniforms) were stuffed into B-44 bags that were duly placed in storage for an indefinite period.

Following two days of bad weather, the group took to the air again, but



As this photograph clearly shows, the 356th FS operated under real field conditions when at Lashenden. The groundcrewmen huddled around the wing of P-51B-1 43-12478 are watching an unidentified lieutenant climb out of the cockpit of the fighter. The pilot assignment of this veteran machine remains unclear. No such mystery surrounds the Mustang parked behind it, for this is none other than 2Lt Thomas 'Gnomee' Miller's P-51B-10 42-106616 *GNOME* (USAAF)

Lt William 'Ben' King taxies out in *ATLANTA PEACH* on 15 May 1944. Note the steel matting and his crew chief, S/Sgt J T Randall, sat on the wing giving him directions (USAAF)





Another shot of Georgian Lt 'Ben' King, this time with his spaniel pup. King remembers that his expression in this photograph was due to the fact that the dog had just kissed him! Note that his *ATLANTA PEACH* was still in Olive Drab finish when this photograph was taken in mid April 1944 (USAAF)

nothing of great consequence occurred. A fighter sweep and several bomber escorts proved uneventful, and Richard Turner was just one of many pilots in the 354th becoming increasingly frustrated by the Luftwaffe's growing absence in the skies over Germany;

'The month of May was a busy month, but a lean one for me. The group destroyed 75 more German planes, but most of them were bagged in five or six missions, which made the remainder tail weary experiences, for the most part, with little enemy action to liven them up. This, of course, was ideal for bombers, but for us fighters it meant hour upon hour

of routine patrol, unable to move in the cramped cockpit. I seldom ever got a glimpse of the enemy. It seems I either missed the missions where a fight developed, or I was on the wrong side of the bomber stream to be part of a big engagement.'

The Eighth Air Force struck out after enemy oil targets once more on 28 May, with the 354th taking the bombers to Magdeburg. A gaggle of over 60 Bf 109s and Fw 190s were met on the way in and sharp action ensued, one pilot scoring a 'draughty' victory without his canopy!

Capt James W Edwards stated that he was leading a flight from the 356th FS when Nos 3 and 4 dropped down to attack a Bf 109 while he and his wingman stayed above as top cover. Then Edwards and his wingman went down. As he recalled;

'My No 2 and I went down too fast and hit compressibility. The dive started at 25,000 ft and I pulled out at about 500-700 ft, losing my canopy in the pull out. After I regained control I was alone, so I started climbing. At 4000 ft I was jumped by two Fw 190s. I saw them coming and fired two short bursts in their general direction to shake them up a bit. I dropped 20 degrees of flaps and started turning, losing altitude at the same time.

'At 500 ft I had no trouble turning inside of them despite my canopy having gone, damaging my flaps as it tore loose. We made about two more turns at 500 ft, and I was about to get deflection on them when the leader snapped and spun. He hit the ground and flames spread for 200 yards from where he had hit. The remaining Fw 190 dived for the deck, and I didn't chase him as I knew I could not catch him with the added drag.'

The group scored a total of ten victories for the day, with Maj Jack Bradley picking up another two. Two pilots, including 8.5 victory ace Lt Don McDowell of the 353rd FS, were lost.

Another three uneventful escort missions were flown to round off the month. However, new and exciting things had come to pass, with the arrival of the first P-51Ds for the 354th. The new model sported a bubble canopy, which greatly improved visibility. Armament had also been increased to six 0.50-calibre Brownings (three in each wing), with booster motors to help eliminate the gun jams that had plagued the P-51B/C.

D-DAY AND A MOVE TO FRANCE

Bad weather caused a slow start to operations in June, but it did not diminish the tension and excitement of the group's wait for D-Day. All airfields, bridges and rail check points had been bombed over and over again to impede any moves that the Germans might make to oppose the operation. The 354th did not fly on the first two days of the month, but 3 June saw the Mustangs bombing rail targets between Soissons and Laon. One aircraft was lost when Lt John H Arnold was forced to bail out in the target area.

Capt Robert Stephens led the 355th FS on a dive-bombing mission against a rail junction at Bourges on 4 June, and as the Mustangs came off the target they spied a Focke-Wulf Fw 56 trainer doing aerobatics. Apparently, its pilot had made an aircraft recognition mistake which would prove fatal - those were not Messerschmitts he was showing off for! Capt Stephens gave him a short burst, which took his landing gear off, and then Lts William King and Huston O'Hair attacked the little aircraft and turned it into a fireball. The most fortunate thing that happened to the P-51 pilots during this whole one-sided episode was that they narrowly avoided colliding with each other whilst trying to shoot the Fw 56 down.

The men of the 354th had known something was afoot in respect to the invasion of France since their departure from the permanent comfort of the 'real' fighter base at Boxted, for the tents and steel matting runway and taxyways of the ALG at Lashenden. As summer approached, the moment of invasion grew ever nearer, and the pilots of the 'Pioneer Mustang

All manned up, this four-ship flight of P-51Bs from the 355th FS awaits the signal to start engines and take off from Lashenden in the immediate aftermath of the D-Day landings. The fighter closest to the camera is Capt 'Maury' Long's "Mary Pat II" (sub-type and serial unknown), which he used to claim his first two (of 5.5) kills in April and May 1944. Then one of the unit's flight commanders, and a future CO, Long has obviously used his seniority to good effect, as his Mustang is the only example in-shot fitted with a Malcolm hood (USAAF)





Crew Chief T/Sgt Paul Kempf poses nonchalantly alongside his P-51B in mid 1944. Sadly, the pilot of this amusingly named Mustang from the 356th FS remains unknown, as does the fighter's sub-type and serial. Note the three broom symbols above the exhaust stubs and the drop tanks piled up in the background (W Louie)

All carrying underwing drop tanks, a quartet of Mustangs from the 356th FS taxi out for take-off on a long-range escort mission from Lashenden in late May. The fighter sat idling behind the two Mustangs facing the camera is Lt Robert Welden's P-51B-1 43-12172 MACKIE THE 3rd. Each fighter has a crew chief sat on its port wing, as per standard operational procedure (USAAF)

'Group' clearly sensed this. Richard Turner described this period in his autobiography;

'Since the 25th of May the group had been informed officially that it was now on a six-hour alert status, and had been assigned two officers from General Patton's Third Army to stay with us and set up ground liaison procedures. There were a rash of secret staff meetings and numerous assignments of enlisted men to special transportation waterproofing schools, all of which clearly indicated that something special was in the breeze. Our flying hadn't changed

much, except that more dive-bombing, fighter sweeps and strafing missions were being thrown in with our normal escort duties, and this stepped up the pace of operations somewhat.

'It didn't take much brainpower to guess that the invasion of the Continent was imminent. The clincher came when we discovered a small detail of cameramen among us who had been assigned to cover our first day activities on "D-Day".'

D-Day for the 354th began when the pilots were called in for a briefing on the night of 5 June. Col Bickell (he had been promoted in late May) informed them that this would be a night mission, which would be quite dangerous, but that this was the big event. The pilots then moved to their aircraft and were airborne by 2057 hrs. They rendezvoused with C-47s and gliders over Portland Bill and headed for France. The Mustangs continued to orbit over the 15-mile stream of aircraft until their charges descended to land on 'Utah' Beach. Weather conditions on return were so bad that most of the Mustangs were forced to land at Stoney Cross, in the New Forest, as this airfield was equipped for night landings.

The pilots duly laid down wherever they could find a space and got a little sleep, before being woken up at 0530 hrs the next morning. Take-off was at 0700 hrs for another trip escorting more C-47s to 'Utah' Beach.





Captains Warren Emerson (left) and Lowell Brueland both achieved ace status during their time in the ETO with the 355th FS. Indeed, 'Brue' Brueland finished the war as the unit's ranking ace with 12.5 kills. He would claim two more victories in Korea flying F-86 Sabres in 1953 with the 51st Fighter Interceptor Wing. Both men are seen standing in front of one of Brueland's numerous P-51s, most of which were christened "Wee Speck" (Emerson)

This time the group returned to Lashenden.

The 354th saw little action again (other than some squadron-strength missions) until 12 June, when the entire group flew a dive-bombing mission with 500 'pounders' against rail installations around Laval and Le Mans. The most notable event of the mission occurred when, en route to the target, and carrying two 500-lb bombs, Capt Wallace Emmer engaged and destroyed an Fw 190 'down on the deck'. Having quickly despatched the fighter for his ninth kill, he then bombed the target.

13 June saw more dive-bombing,

along with the strafing of targets of opportunity during the flight home. One of the targets that was well worked over was a large convoy of enemy trucks caught on roads around St Lô. The devastation was overwhelming, although the 356th FS suffered the loss of Lt W R Perkins when his Mustang (P-51B-5 43-6827) hit a tree during a strafing pass and was destroyed.

The aerial action picked up on the afternoon mission of 14 June, when the group escorted Douglas A-20s and Martin B-26s to bomb tactical targets near Caen. Ten Bf 109s were spotted intercepting a formation of B-26s, so the Mustangs went to work. Five of the Messerschmitt fighters were downed, with Capt Don Beerbower being credited with one and one shared destroyed to raise his score to 14.5 victories.

On the morning of 15 June the first detachment of the air echelon departed for France, en route to A-2 (Criqueville) airstrip sited on the Normandy coast. These men had the chore of setting up the field before the P-51s came over. The 354th had been officially informed on 13 June that it was to move to France in order to give close support to the army advance. 'Thus our work with the Eighth Air Force came to its conclusion. We continued our operations under the control of XIX Tactical Air Command of Brigadier General Otto P Weyland' - this was how Richard Turner described the group's final break from its 'surrogate' command.

Around this time the men of the 354th began to take note of strange noises at night which they at first thought might be German bombers. However, no bombs fell, but red lights moved across the sky heading west. They soon discovered that these were V1 rockets, one of Hitler's so called new secret weapons. The rockets actually consisted of a ram jet engine with short stubby wings, carrying a high-explosive warhead. They flew at nearly 400 miles per hour and were unguided except for being fired in the general direction of south-east England. Most were aimed at London, having been launched from what looked like ski jumps. The pilots soon picked up on Lt 'Willie Y' Anderson's nickname for them - 'Doodlebugs'.

The group was back out dive-bombing and strafing on 16 and 17 June, and on the latter date the 353rd had just finished working over a road junction near Caumont when 'Willie Y' chased after a V1. He duly shot



Born in the Swedish town of Kromfors in 1921, William Yngve Anderson moved to the US with his parents at an early age. He joined the Army Reserves in September 1941, and was rated a pilot exactly one year later. Initially assigned to the 79th FS/20th FG, Anderson transferred to the 353rd FS/354th FG in January 1943, and accompanied the group to England later that year. Known as "Willie Y" to his squadronmates, he had at least two assigned Mustangs in the ETO named *Swede's Steed*. The first was P-51B-1 43-12172, and he is seen here posing in front of it in early 1944. As previously noted, this veteran fighter later became Lt Robert Welden's *MACKIE THE 3rd*. Note Anderson's good luck charm pinned to his B-10 flying jacket and the whistle attached to the loop in the jacket's zipper. Like most USAAF fighter pilots, he is also wearing a scarf fashioned out of parachute silk (USAAF)

P-51D-5 44-13383 was "Willie Y" Anderson's last *Swede's Steed* in the ETO, and he used it to down three of his seven kills. The eighth cross within the fighter's scoreboard denotes his V1 kill on 17 June 1944. This was the first flying bomb to be destroyed by the 354th FG. *Swede's Steed III* was photographed at A-31 soon after Anderson had returned to the USA in September 1944, having completed his tour (Anderson)



the pilotless flying bomb down, and on returning to base wanted to know 'How many doodlebugs make an ace?'

Other pilots also scored kills on their way back home, although their opponents were manned Fw 190s from 10./JG 2. Four Focke-Wulf fighters were destroyed near Vire, with Maj Jack Bradley's shared claim pushing his score up to 14. Three P-51s had been lost during the course of the day, however, one machine being downed by the explosion of its own bomb, which killed pilot Lt A J Diziere. The remaining two men, Lts T L Donohoo and J Rody, were both captured.

The following day Maj Turner also shot down a 'Doodlebug' and caused a second to crash after flipping it over with his wingtip. This was how he described the mission in his *Mustang Pilot*,

'In the early morning of the 18th of June, we ran a dive-bombing mission into France which was completed within two hours. On the return trip to base I hovered my flight in a loose orbit at 6000 ft between Calais and Dover. With plenty of fuel and ammunition left, I was tempted to subtract a few buzz bombs from the many the Germans were sending over to terrorise London. They travelled at an altitude of between 2000 and 3000 ft, and usually cruised at speeds of between 300 and 500 mph. I felt that if we could pick them up over the Channel and dive on them, we stood an excellent chance of knocking them down since they were unable to evade us in any way.'



The 353rd FS's ranking ace, Capt Glenn Eagleston, kneels by fellow ace Capt Jack T Bradley's P-51B-5 43-6425 *MARGIE MARU*. When this shot was taken in late April 1944, Bradley had claimed 9.5 of his 15 kills. At least five of these had been claimed in this very fighter (USAAF)

Maj Bradley taxies out in *MARGIE MARU* in early June 1944. A long-lived P-51, by the time 43-6425 was salvaged on 8 November 1944, it had destroyed 16 aircraft during the course of 125 missions (USAAF)





Aces high! The 355th's Lt Warren Emerson (left) and Lt Edward Hunt of the 353rd FS pose for the camera below Lt John Matte's appropriately named P-51B *MY BUDDY*. Emerson finished his tour in September 1944 with six kills, and Hunt's score stood at 6.5 when he was killed in action (either by flak, or simply a victim of bad weather) in P-51D-5 44-13559 on 8 November 1944 (Emerson)

An excellent head-on view of a P-51B equipped with 75 US gallon drop tanks (W Louie)

I sighted one below and dived on it, pulling out behind it, but slightly out of range. I tried to close the distance, but the missile was just a little too fast. I chased the infernal machine for ten minutes, alternatively diving to gain speed, and pulling up to lob long-range bursts at it. Eventually one of my bullets must have scored a chance hit in the engine, for suddenly it emitted a long streamer of yellow flame and lost speed quickly. In a curving dive, it plunged into a vacant field below, where it exploded harmlessly. Encouraged by my success, I proceeded back to the Channel area to pick up another. I began to wonder how I was going to get the next V1, because most of my ammo was expended, and my gun barrels had burnt out.

'Soon I saw another one and made a very steep dive to gain extra overtaking speed. This bomb must have been moving more slowly than the first one, for I almost overran it as I pulled out of my dive. As I flew alongside the little monster, I had a new idea. I knew they were controlled by a gyro guidance "brain", and perhaps this mechanism could be upset without gunfire. I carefully edged close to it and placed my wingtip about a foot under its tiny fin. Rolling my plane suddenly neatly flipped the V1 upside-down, and it promptly spun into the shallows of the Channel near the English shore, where it blew a useless hole in the water. Jubilant with my success, I rushed back to Maidstone and hastened to tell the other pilots of the new pastime that I had discovered.'





No photos have so far come to light of Bob Goodnight, who was one of the 354th FG's early aces. Assigned to the 356th FS soon after the unit's formation, and dubbed the unit's 'hot' pilot due to his unruly behaviour in the air, Goodnight flew P-51s christened *Mary Anne*. His final tally was 7.25, all of which had been claimed by 10 April 1944.

Goodnight's tour ended in the early hours of a July morning in France when his Jeep collided with a similar vehicle driven by squadronmate

Lt Charles Simonson. Both men were escorting nurses back to a nearby field hospital at the time following a party at A-2, and Goodnight suffered a badly broken jaw (USAAF)

The dominance of Allied air power - 356th FS P-51Ds are seen on parade at A-29 in western France (USAAF)

Following days of strafing and dive-bombing, a real change came about on 20 June when the 354th was called on to resume escorting the bombers for the Eighth Air Force. Capt Stephens led the men to Magdeburg, but the trip turned out to be uneventful, much to the chagrin of the pilots.

Things picked up a bit on the 21st when Capt Emerson led the mission to Genshagen, near Berlin. Just after rendezvousing with B-24s of the 2nd Bomb Division, Capt Max Lamb of the 356th FS (who was leading a flight flying at about 23,000 ft) sighted Me 410s queuing up to attack the bombers. As they made their move to come in from four o'clock, Lamb dived down with his Mustangs from astern. They in turn were spotted by the Messerschmitts, which broke in all directions. Lamb slotted in behind one of the Me 410s diving for the deck, fired a couple of bursts and set its right engine on fire. His pursuit of the bomber-destroyer continued down to about 4000 ft, from which height the Me 410 pilot attempted a split-ess and clipped the tree tops, cartwheeling into the ground and exploding.

Within seconds of Lamb starting his climb back up to the bomber stream, he had spied another Me 410 flying along in a straight line at just 100 ft above the ground. Seemingly oblivious to the presence of the Mustang, the Messerschmitt flew on as Lamb 'parked on its six o'clock' and opened fire. Good strikes were seen, and the right engine stopped and began to emit volumes of black smoke. A few more bursts caused the Me 410 to pull up and then turn over on its back, before crashing into the ground. Four of the twin-engined fighters were destroyed for the loss of 2Lt R K Porter, who was shot down and killed over the target area in P-51B-1 43-12300.

The 354th flew its last sorties from Lashenden on 22 June, these being individual squadron missions where pilots were primarily tasked with hitting targets of opportunity. The only unit to engage the Luftwaffe during the course of the day was the 353rd FS, which had dropped bombs on tank cars and goods wagons. On its return leg home the squadron was attacked from below by three Bf 109Gs, and two of the Messerschmitts were quickly destroyed, one falling to future 14-kill ace 1Lt Ken Dahlberg (this was his





first victory) and the second being shared by Capt Eagleston (taking his tally to 14.5) and Lt Charles Koenig (whose score now stood at 2.5 out of an eventual 6.5 kills). The German pilots had, however, shot down and killed 2Lt C H Stewart (in P-51B-10 43-106633) in their initial pass.

Late that afternoon two squadrons departed Lashenden for A-2, with the third unit following the next morning. Missions from the new strip began immediately, and its closeness to the frontline allowed the 354th to fly six to eight missions a day, including sweeps, ground support sorties and even top cover missions for P-47s bombing and strafing.

Nine missions were flown on 23 June - mostly patrols, with little occurring. The group lost Lt P E Moran in P-51B-15 42-106952, however. Three days later flak again took its toll on the 354th when two fighters were shot down, 2Lt J D Carpenter and Flt Off D L Richards both being killed, as was Lt W J Walbrecker, who hit a pole whilst strafing on the same day.

The group encountered the Luftwaffe once again on 28 June, when two flights from the 356th FS on an assault-area patrol of the beachhead spotted a lone Bf 109 being chased by five Spitfires. When the fighter entered the

Two flights from the 356th FS return to A-2 in tight formation in late July 1944. The lead aircraft of the lower flight is P-51D-5 44-13561 *SHORT-FUSE SALLEE*, which was Maj Richard Turner's first 'bubble top' Mustang. This was the fighter he used to claim his 11th, and last, kill on 30 July 1944. Most of these aircraft carry personal markings in the form of nicknames on their noses, and all still feature invasion stripes bar the two Olive Drab P-51Bs. The star-spangled black/blue nose band immediately aft of the all-white spinner was the unit marking applied by the 356th FS to all of its Mustangs in the spring of 1944 (USAAF)



Lt Harlow Eldred flew P-51B (sub-type and serial unknown) *Me-Too Evie*, coded 'FT-M', during his tour with the 353rd FS. The unit's yellow sawtooth marking on the nose is clearly visible in this shot (Eldred)

the squadron's patrol area, Maj Turner led his flight into the fray;

'Excitement raced through me now as I gauged the distance between the Spits and the '109. If he turned back to Le Havre, which was out of my patrol area, I'd have to let the Spits have him. But if he came on to the Caen area he'd be entering my territory, and the Spits would have to take pot luck. Any German fighter in my patrol area was fair game, and I wasn't planning to waste time being polite to our allies. As it turned out, I was downright rude. The 109 pilot saw us coming, and turned south toward Caen. Forgetting the Spitfires and everything else but my prey, I whipped over in a steep right turn and latched onto the tail of the 109, sandwiching myself between him and the Spits. Naturally, my flights followed, and the Spitfires had to pull up and abandon the chase or get run over by a herd of P-51s.'

Turner despatched the lone

fighter with two bursts of fire from close range. The pilot bailed out and the Bf 109 crashed just 20 miles from A-2, so Turner and his crew chief, S/Sgt Cliff 'Tommy' Thompson, drove over in a Jeep to inspect the downed fighter, which was more or less intact;

'From the wing root to the nose of the plane, we counted around 200 0.50-calibre holes. No wonder the pilot had bailed out so quickly! I knew that I had scored a number of hits, but I had no idea that the fire had been so concentrated. It gave me a new and added respect for the destructive powers of my guns.'

It was the turn of the 353rd FS to encounter enemy aircraft the following day, when Fw 190s flown by pilots that seemed to be quite experienced were intercepted during an afternoon patrol near Berriere. Four of the Focke-Wulf fighters were downed, all of which fell to current or future Mustang aces, namely 1Lts Carl Bickel, Ken Dahlberg and Robert Reynolds. The latter pilot also shared in the destruction of a second Fw 190 with Capt Wallace Emmer, whose score now stood at 10.5 kills.

Further patrols were flown on the last day of the month, and once again a flight of Mustangs from the 356th FS sighted an engagement between some Spitfires and Bf 109s. This time, however, the fight was taking place at 30,000 ft over the French town of Vire. Led by Maj Turner, the squadron climbed for a solid 15 minutes to join the fray - the Mustangs had only just departed A-2 when the melee was spotted. The four Spitfires turned north and the four Bf 109s continued south, seemingly oblivious to the P-51s climbing hard beneath them. Turner opened fire once he was within range, and the German fighters immediately attempted to turn

into the US fighters. The 356th pilots easily countered this manoeuvre by turning even harder, and three of the Bf 109s dived away, leaving the fighter that Turner had 'winged' lagging behind. The major soon finished this machine off, taking his tally to ten kills in the process.

The Mustangs continued to chase the three remaining Bf 109s as they dived headlong for the ground. Finally overtaking them, Lt Welden later reported;

'I closed to about 200 yards, fired and saw large pieces coming off the left wing. I moved over to the right wing root and fired a short burst, which resulted in coolant and black smoke streaming back. I closed to 100 yards dead astern, fired a long burst, and the E/A's whole left stabiliser came off- the plane went into a loose, uncontrolled, oscillating spin.'

Welden had just scored his final combat kill, taking his overall tally to 6.25. The remaining two Bf 109s were despatched by 2Lt W K Pendergrass and 1Lt R T Stolzle.

PATROLS AND MORE PATROLS

With Allied forces doing their best to break out of Normandy, the men of the 354th thought that there would be much more action for them to come in July. However, the entire month was spent flying boring fighter sweeps and patrols over the beaches. With the Luftwaffe all but wiped out in France, the patrolling fighters rarely encountered any enemy opposition in the air. And with the job of providing long range fighter escort for heavy bombers now exclusively within the Eighth Air Force's remit, the 354th found itself with little to do but strafe ground targets.

Undoubtedly the most extraordinary event of the month took place, appropriately, on 4 July, when Gen Elwood 'Pete' Quesada arrived at A-2 along with the Supreme Commander of Allied Armies in the ETO, Gen Dwight Eisenhower. This was not an inspection trip, however, for the group's 355th FS happened to be flying just the aircraft they were looking for.

Several weeks earlier, a team from the group's servicing squadron had removed the fuselage tank from behind the pilot's seat of war-weary P-51B-5 43-68777 and installed a second seat in its place - the quartet of wing guns had also been deleted. This allowed the aircraft to be used either as a 'hack', an instructional



Five-kill ace Lt Richard Asbury scored his first 1.5 victories flying P-51Bs with the 363rd FG. Having completed his tour with the group, he returned to the US on leave, before volunteering again for combat. Asbury was sent to the 356th FS in November 1944, where he was eventually assigned P-51D-20 44-63782 *Merle Maureen* following a spell flying the P-47D. He claimed 3.5 kills with this Mustang (Asbury)

This rare shot shows Gen 'Pete' Quesada completing his pre-start up checks in the cockpit of P-51B-5 43-6877 at A-2 on 4 July 1944. Behind him, minus any headgear, is Gen Dwight D Eisenhower, who was about to have an aerial tour of the frontline. 'Ike' thoroughly enjoyed his flight in the 354th FG's unique two-seater, although his boss, Gen George C Marshall, did not! (USAAF)



aircraft or just the thing to take crew chiefs for rides!

Maj Turner remembers the 4 July flight well;

'They would fly a personal reconnaissance of the St Lô area in the twin-seated Mustang. Colonel Bickell informed me that he had chosen my squadron to provide the other three aircraft and pilots for protective escort to the two generals during their flight over the area. I was extremely proud to have my squadron chosen to accompany such important personnel, though I must admit, the grave responsibility made me a little nervous.'

'I selected the pilots from my senior flight commanders. General Quesada would lead the flight, with a flight commander who had flown over 50 missions on his wing, and I would lead the second element with another flight commander on my wing. The three accompanying pilots would have a cumulative experience of some 175 missions and 40 aerial victories. The plan was to carry out the flight under the guise of a routine patrol, and to have nothing said over the RT that would give the slightest indication that this was a special flight, or that important personnel were involved. If anything happened to that old war-weary P-51 and its important passengers, Allied troops would be dealt a crippling psychological blow. Needless to say, I slept fitfully that night.'



Although this photograph is badly marked, it certainly gives a true flavour of the operational environment endured by the 354th FG in France in 1944-45. This shot shows the dispersal area for the 356th FS at A-2 in mid 1944. Steel matting abounded! (W Louie)

The 355th FS's famous TF-51B, 43-6877. The fighter received this nickname after the 'flight of the Generals', on 4 July 1944 (USAAF)





5.5-kill ace Lt Carl Bickel named his P-51D-5 44-13628 in honour of his late CO, Capt Don Beerbower, whose Mustangs were all called *BONNIE-B* (see photo below). Having joined the 354th FG in June 1943, Bickel eventually became the 353rd FS's Squadrons Ops Officer (USAAF)

Undoubtedly one of the longest-lived, and most successful, Mustangs to serve in the ETO was P-51B-1 43-12375. Assigned to Capt Don Beerbower in early 1944, he used this machine until he was shot down by flak whilst flying it on 9 August 1944. The bulk of the ace's 15.5 kills were scored in 43-12375. The fighter is seen here at A-2 in mid July 1944 (via Cook)

'The next morning as I looked over the twin-seater, I couldn't help but wonder if General Eisenhower would know when he climbed into the back seat that he would virtually be trapped there until landing, when the crew chief could unfasten the closures. It would have been a near impossibility to get out of that rear seat in the air. I myself wouldn't have ridden in the back seat of that monster for all the tea in China.'

'At briefing my pilots and I were introduced to General Eisenhower who shook each of us by the hand, saying that he understood that he

was to be flying with the finest fighter pilots in the ETO. It was deeply gratifying to be so addressed by the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces. The general seemed genuinely interested in us, and in our opinions. He was a man of authority and determination, whose manner impressed all those who saw him.'

'As we went out to our planes, I watched General Eisenhower climb with some difficulty through the small opening behind the cockpit into the cramped bucket seat. There wasn't enough room for both him and a parachute, so the general flew without one. I watched his face as the crew chief buttoned down the Zeus fasteners on the Plexiglas window with a screwdriver, and if he had any misgivings about his helplessness, he showed no concern.'

Gen Quesada fired up the engine, taxied out and away they went. Col Bickell men hastened to get all flyable Mustangs in the air to protect them. In about an hour the P-51B landed on the steel matt runway and the mission was over. Maj Turner, who had had to abort early on in the mission





Top

Anything that moved behind enemy lines during the second half of 1944 was a potential target for the roving fighters of the 354th FG. Here, two barges are seen being worked over on an inland canal, this shot being taken by the Mustang's gun camera (USAAF)

Above

P-51D-5 44-13335 was the first 'bubble top' Mustang issued to future 355th FS CO, Capt Gilbert Talbot. Amongst the original cadre of pilots assigned to the 354th FG upon its formation in November 1942 (he joined straight out of flying school), Talbot would finish the war with exactly five kills to his credit (USAAF)

when the new P-51D that he was flying suffered an engine instrument failure, was on hand when Gen Eisenhower returned to A-2;

'As I arrived the general was being helped out of his cubbyhole with a wide grin on his face. He was so pleased with the mission that he could hardly wait to get back to his planning staff and start the gears grinding. This was the first time in history that a ground general had personally reconnoitered the terrain of a planned battle operation from a fighter in the presence of the enemy.'

Although he had clearly enjoyed his one-off Mustang mission, Gen Eisenhower did not enjoy the next day when he was admonished for the impromptu act by his boss, Gen George C Marshall (Chairman of the Combined Chiefs of Staff Committee), in the Pentagon in Washington. To make matters worse, Marshall only found out about the flight when he read the daily newspapers on 5 July!

Regardless of Gen Marshall's disapproval, the 354th was proud of their aircraft's employment, and named the P-51B *THE STARS LOOK DOWN*.

The next aerial action for the group came on 7 July during a fighter sweep led by Capt Don Beerbower. The Mustangs ran into some 30 Fw 190s in the vicinity of Perdreauville, and although the German fighters were not eager for combat (they broke for the deck in all directions), the P-51s set off after them in hot pursuit. The 353rd FS managed to shoot down four Fw 190s, veteran pilot Capt Felix Rogers claiming two of these to push his tally to six kills, thus giving him ace status. 'Buzz' Beerbower also claimed a Focke-Wulf, taking his score to 15.5 destroyed. This would prove to be his last victory.

Following this brief flurry of fighter activity, the doldrums returned to the 354th FG, the group flying eight or nine missions per day. Virtually all sorties were performed by two flights of eight aircraft, and with an early sunrise during the summer months, most days saw the first patrol airborne by 0530 hrs. These patrols and, sweeps would continue throughout the day until as late as 2215 hrs.

Thanks to such a hectic mission schedule, by the end of July many of the original cadre of pilots who had arrived in the ETO with the 354th back in November 1943 were now becoming tour-expired. The Eighth Air Force had defined the length of combat tours for its fighter pilots long ago,

but no attempt had been made to introduce such a policy within the Ninth Air Force. Therefore, those pilots in the 354th that had been in combat since December 1943 had now flown close to 130 sorties. Some returned to the group after leave in the United States, but most became instructors for the rest of the war.

There was no further aerial action for the 354th until 17 July. On this date Capt Virgil Dietrich was leading the 355th FS on a patrol when 20+ Fw 190s were encountered in the St Lô area. Dietrich claimed one fighter destroyed and Capt Lowell Brueland 'bagged' a second, taking his tally to 8.5 kills. The 354th suffered the loss of Lt Thomas Cannon during the engagement, his P-51 last being seen in the combat area.

Later that day a patrol from the 353rd FS caught six Fw 190s in the same area, and the Mustang pilots managed to break them up and down a single fighter. After departing the combat area, Lt Harvey Chapman found himself flying headlong into a formation of some 40+ Fw 190s. He broke into the formation with his guns blazing, before immediately split-essing for the deck and effecting his escape.

The third encounter of 17 July came when Maj Robert Stephens of the 355th FS led a sweep to the Paris area. Approximately 50 Fw 190s and Bf 109s were sighted above the Mustangs, who at once started climbing up to engage them. In a reversal of recent encounters, some of these Luftwaffe pilots proved to be quite aggressive, and a series of dogfights took place. The 355th managed to down three Fw 190s, one of whom became Maj Stephens tenth victory. Two Mustangs failed to return from the battle, however.

Following this day of action, German fighters were encountered only fleetingly during the next week. For example, a group fighter sweep on 18 July intercepted just two enemy aircraft near Amiens, with one falling to the 354th and the other to P-47s patrolling in the same area. A squadron sweep by the 356th FS turned up eight Bf 109s in the Le Mans area, but only one Messerschmitt was shot down.

Capt Wallace Emmer led the 353rd on yet another fighter sweep on the afternoon of 26 July, ground controllers vectoring the aircraft to the St Lô area once again. Allied air-search radar had detected more than 40 Bf 109s that were preparing



Maj Bob Stephens' sole 'bubble top' Mustang was P-51D-20 44-63711. As this August 1944 photograph clearly shows, the 355th FS CO christened his final Mustang *KILLER!*, just as he had done with his previous four P-51Bs. The Ace of Clubs playing card was an apt choice for Stephens, as his kill tally clearly reflects. He would claim three victories with this aircraft in late August, raising his final tally to 13 kills (USAAF)

An armourer swabs down the gun barrel on a 355th FS P-51B. The four 'fifties' in the early model Mustang initially proved unreliable, but the hardworking groundcrews of the 354th FG had ironed out all the problems by mid 1944 (USAAF)





to attack ground forces. The Mustangs pilots wasted no time in downing nine of the Messerschmitts, Capt Emmer himself being credited with two and one shared (with Lt Carl Bickell) destroyed. Lt Clifford Dean was the other high scorer with two Bf 109s.

Late that afternoon Capt Warren Emerson was leading the 355th on an escort mission for B-26s when their unit intercepted 20 Bf 109s and 20 Fw 190s, split into two formations. The squadron destroyed five, including an Fw 190 claimed by Emerson, for the loss of one Mustang.

Capt Lowell Brueland and seven other 355th FS Mustangs were on a patrol south-east of St Lô on the afternoon of 28 July when a large formation of Bf 109s was sighted. Three Fw 190s then also appeared on the scene. The encounter as reported by Brueland stated;

'As we went in for the attack I noticed three Fw 190s. Following them, I attacked one, which pulled up through a thin layer of clouds at about 8000 ft when I hit him. He pulled into a tight turn and I hit him again. This time he bailed out, and I saw his 'chute open.

'Numbers three and four men in my flight followed the other Fw 190s. I found three more Me 109s flying through the clouds at about 5000 ft. Covered by my numbers three and four men from White flight, we followed the Messerschmitts south-east for several minutes before we caught one of them in the open. I hit him and he broke down, and as I hit him again in his dive, he bailed out. I didn't see his 'chute open, the plane going straight in.

'We then pulled back up and found four more Me 109s flying south-east, 3000 to 4000 ft above and ahead of us. As the clouds thinned out we pulled up behind them. I took the one on the left and my number two man took the one on the right. My target was hit on the first burst, and he pulled straight up and bailed out. His 'chute opened. The remaining three broke down, with my two and three men behind them. Number two shot

S/Sgt Ben Luttrell is seen with his P-51B (sub-type and serial unknown) *Suzy Belle* in France in the late summer of 1944. The 356th's distinctive stripe and stars marking was devised by squadron CO, Maj Richard Turner, who admitted years after the war that his groundcrews cursed him for devising such a complex motif! (W Louie)



P-51D-5 44-14010 has often been identified erroneously as the mount of late war ace Capt Jack 'Cut Bank Kid' Warner, when in fact the fighter was assigned to his namesake, Lt Frederick J Warner. And despite the aircraft carrying four kill markings below the cockpit, Lt Warner's overall tally of aerial victories amounted to two kills, neither of which were scored in 44-14010. This photograph was taken in early September 1944 at Debden, in Essex, home of the VIII Fighter Command's famous 4th FG. The 356th FS had no doubt flown across to southern England looking for an escort mission to participate in. The second natural metal Mustang visible in this shot is P-51D-5 44-13561 **SHANTY IRISHMAN**, assigned to Lt Francis McIntire, who finished his ETO tour with 4.5 kills (USAAF)

one of them down, and as I circled the area to get the two boys back in formation, 25 to 30 Fw 190s flew directly over us at 7000 ft (I was at 4000 ft). Just as they passed, I noticed an Fw 190 coming up at me from directly below and behind. I broke into it, and as we circled, another came down from above. I pulled straight up into him and fired head on. I hit him and both Fw 190s headed for the deck. I did not follow for I was short on gas and ammunition.'

This triple haul (and one damaged) ran Brueland's score up to 11.5 confirmed.

The last encounter for the month took place on 30 July when Lt Col Teschner led the group on a patrol that was designed to give coverage to B-26s supporting the breakthrough at St Lô. The 356th's Maj Richard Turner sighted a flight of three bogies trailing two flights of P-51s, so he went down to investigate. They turned out to be Bf 109s, which split as soon as they were discovered. Turner sent one element after the two that broke in one direction while he took the other. After a long chase with his Mustang at full power, the major finally succeeded in hitting the Bf 109 in the cockpit with 'one lonely strike'. This seemed to slow the Messerschmitt down, the pilot choosing to end the series of turns that he had been making in favour of a last ditch dive for freedom. 'I was pleased at this for I knew I could overtake him in a dive', Turner later recounted.

Sensing his 11th kill, the ace inched his P-51D ever closer to the Bf 109, firing intermittently. Seeing a scattering of strikes, which slowed his victim down even further, Turner hit him with a solid burst just before the Messerschmitt reached a solid bank of cloud. The German fighter began to stream coolant and pieces flew off. A fire erupted and the canopy came off, nearly hitting the Mustang. Then the pilot bailed out, his 'chute opening up as the P-51 flew past the burning Bf 109. Resuming his patrol, Maj Turner had just claimed his 11th, and last, aerial victory.

Although the 354th FG had scored just 36 victories for the month of July, the group total had now exceeded the 400 mark.

COVERING PATTON'S ARMY

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the 354th FG had been assigned to the new XIX Tactical Air Command, under the command of Brig Gen Otto P Weyland, in June. This change had had little impact on the group's day to day routine until the arrival of Gen George Patton's Third Army in Normandy in August 1944. And it was during this month that the new American force started its drive through France, making full use of its armoured columns. From then on the 354th FG would work very closely with the Third Army until VE-Day, quickly gaining the utmost respect from Patton and his men.

The first mission flown by the group in August, on the 1st, saw the 353rd FS supporting B-26s which had been sent to bomb bridges and rail installations. Four Bf 109s were intercepted as they came down in a line astern attack on the B-26s, but not before a single Marauder had been lost. Three of the Messerschmitts were destroyed, one of which fell to Lt 'Willie Y' Anderson to give him ace status.

The next few days saw no further action, and the Mustang pilots were becoming restless. Even the presence of Patton's army advancing eastwards did not spur the Luftwaffe into any great action.

On 7 August, Maj Turner was leading his 356th FS in a fighter sweep east of Chartres when a crashed Bf 109 was spotted in a field. The major went down to take a closer look, and discovered a whole squadron of well-camouflaged Messerschmitt fighters. Several strafing runs were made, and by the time the Mustangs had departed 13 enemy aircraft were either in

Lt C E Buchanan (left) of the 356th FS chose *LIL' WHEEE-ZER* as the name for his P-51D-20 44-72276. Buchanan was one of a rash of replacement pilots that joined the 354th FG during the summer of 1944 (W Louie)



flames or in ruins. Maj Turner destroyed three of the Bf 109s and Capt Verlin Chambers two.

Tempering this success was the loss of three Mustangs, with ace Lt Tommy Miller and two newer pilots, Lts Harbers and Charles Simonson, going down. Miller and Harbers fell victim to a flak gun sited in a church steeple, while Simonson was hit during a strafing pass on the Bf 109s. The latter pilot had bailed out over a battalion of US tanks, and he soon returned to the group, while Tommy Miller ended up a PoW. Harbers was killed.

The 353rd also saw combat that same day, when a fighter sweep led by Capt Emmer ran into a dozen Bf 109s flying in pairs in the Laval-Alençon area. The P-51s quickly sorted them out, downing six, with Capt Emmer getting his 14th, and last, victory and Lt 'Willie Y' Anderson claiming his final two kills to take his tally to seven. Two men were lost, however, namely Lts Edwin Pinkerton and Loyd Overfield. The latter pilot had claimed three Bf 109s to 'make ace', before in turn being shot down - he would return to the group five days later, and eventually finish his tour with 11 kills.

The 354th had never suffered the loss of five pilots in one day, and this was hard to take.

7 August had been bad enough, but things got even worse on the 9th. The group's ranking ace with 15.5 kills, Capt Don Beerbower, had been acting as squadron commander of the 353rd FS in the absence of Maj Jack Bradley, who had been on leave in the United States since 30 June. Recently promoted to major, Beerbower was leading the unit on a morning armed reconnaissance sweep between Épernay and Reims when he sighted an airfield about three miles north of the latter town. He dropped down to investigate.

On his first pass he came under fire from heavy flak, but this did not prevent him from spotting some 30 Ju 88s scattered around the airfield perimeter. Beerbower informed his pilots that he was going to make east to west passes against the flak guns while they strafed the Ju 88s from north to south. The CO knocked out two gun emplacements in addition to destroying one of the Ju 88s on his pass, while his squadron left seven bombers in flames.

Making one more pass while his Mustangs cleared the airfield, Beerbower now became the sole target for all the remaining flak sites. His aircraft (veteran P-51B-1 43-12375) suffered multiple hits, and he was seen to pull up, jettison his canopy and go over the side. Some of his pilots speculated that the ace must have struck the empennage as he bailed out, for although he reached the ground alive, Maj D M 'Buzz' Beerbower died in captivity later that day. He was just 17 days short of reaching his 23rd birthday.



Lt Richard Tillary was another of the replacement pilots assigned to the 356th, where he flew this P-51D (sub-type and serial unknown) which he named after the popular opera singer, Miss Grace Moore, who visited the 354th FG in France (W Louie)



Capt Felix 'Mike' Rogers would assume command of the 353rd FS following the loss of two COs in a day, on 9 August 1944. By then a seven-kill ace, Rogers led the unit until he was declared tour-expired on 1 October 1944. He remained in the post-war USAF until retiring with the rank of four star general in 1978, by which time he had served an incredible 36 years in the armed forces (USAAF)

The whole group was in shock over the demise of its top ace, and an outstanding leader. None took his loss harder than his squadronmate, Capt Wallace Emmer. Ironically, Emmer was now called upon to take temporary command of the 353rd.

In the late afternoon he took to the skies as part of a group-strength armed reconnaissance mission (led by Capt Chambers of the 356th FS) to the Rouen area.

All seemed to be going well until the Mustangs came under fire whilst cruising at 11,000 ft north of Reims. One of the shells hit Emmer's fighter (P-51D-5 44-13948) and exploded, causing the Mustang to burst into flames. The aircraft soon lost height and began to shed parts, and Emmer was last seen huddled down in the cockpit prior to jettisoning the canopy and going over the side. He survived the jump but was very badly burned, and after spending months

in various German hospitals, Capt Wallace Emmer died in a PoW camp on 15 February 1945 from an attack of myocarditis (inflammation of the heart muscle), caused by an infection that he had contracted due to his weakened physical state.

Following the shock of losing two squadron commanders in one day, the 353rd FS welcomed seven-kill ace Capt Felix 'Mike' Rogers as the new squadron CO - he had served with the unit since June 1943.

During this period the group began packing up and preparing for its impending move to Gael, on the Brest Peninsula. This base was located on a high plateau, and was coded A-31. Richard Turner was one of the first pilots to visit the new airfield;

'We moved our base of operations once again during the 11th through the 13th of August, from the A-2 beach strip to a field near Monfort. The new airdrome was about 25 miles west of Rennes at the root of the Brest Peninsula, and we were curious to see it since the base had been recently held by the Luftwaffe before Patton's rapid advance had forced them to flee.

'It was interestingly situated with pockets of German resistance all around it, bypassed by the fast-moving Third Army. To the west of us a large fortification was still manned by a diehard German regiment. There was a pocket of Germans still offering resistance to the south, at Saint Nazaire, and another around Falaise in the rear. All this gave the new base an unexpected atmosphere of tension. But when we arrived we found the landing strip was in good shape, although the buildings were severely damaged. Group Command promptly appropriated the buildings for its own use, and the squadrons set up bivouac areas in tents again as before.'

The group did not conduct its first mission from the new field until 14 August, the 354th in the meantime flying routine patrols, a few escort-missions for light and medium bombers and ground attack sorties for Patton's army.

The Mustangs were back in action on the 16th. That afternoon, the 356th was returning from a patrol when 70 Fw 190s, loaded with bombs, were sighted flying at 2000 ft. Although drastically outnumbered, the eight P-51s dove down and broke up the formations, forcing the Fw 190s to jettison their bombs. Some of the German fighter-bombers broke and ran while others stayed to fight, allowing Lts Keith Aldrich and Walter Williams to down two of them. Two Mustangs were lost to the enemy in return.

That same afternoon Lt Charles Koenig was leading a patrol of 353rd FS Mustangs that spotted about 20 Fw 190s forming up in elements of two above a hole in the overcast at 11,000 ft near Maintenon. The two flights of P-51s had just climbed to 14,000 ft in order to attack the Focke-Wulf fighters from above when another 60+ Fw 190s joined the fray from out of the clouds below. Lt Kenny Dahlberg later reported;

I felt sure that I had bought it that day. There were eight of us against eighty of them. Everywhere you looked there was a Mustang mixing it with three or four Jerries. The first one I got was on the tail end of a flight of four. I poured lead into him, getting hits around the canopy area. The plane went down smoking and out of control.

I tagged onto a second, gave him a few bursts and the damn thing blew up, splashing me with oil. At the same time I noticed my oil line had been hit. I wheeled around and dropped, hoping to make it back to my own lines.

Looming smack in front of me was a lone Fw 190. That's when I found my gunsight was out, so I used tracers from 60 degrees and closed to 30 degrees. My bullets hit and he blew up.

I noticed tracers coming over both my wings. I checked my tail and saw four Fw 190s converging on me for the kill. I saw a nice black cloud and I ducked into it.'

Dahlberg did not make it back to his base that day. After losing most of its oil, the engine in his fighter heated up and he was forced to bail out. He was assisted in evading the Germans by a French couple who hid him until he could be helped through the lines to join advancing American troops.

Despite having been shot down, Dahlberg's triple haul had taken his tally to exactly five kills. He was joined in 'aceedom' by Lt Charles Koenig, whose pair of Fw 190s destroyed (plus a probable and a damaged) had boosted his final tally to 6.5 victories. Yet despite the creation of two new aces, perhaps the most outstanding performer of the

Lt Kenn Dahlberg poses on the wing of Lt David O'Hara's P-51B-10 42-10660 *SHELLELAUGH*, which was just one of several similarly named Mustangs that he flew with the 353rd FS. Despite scoring 14 kills, Dahlberg was never assigned a P-51, possibly due to his late arrival in the group - he turned up at Lashenden on 2 June 1944. This did not prevent him from rapidly building up his score, however, and it is believed that he claimed three Fw 190s destroyed in this very machine to 'make ace' on 16 August (Dahlberg)



16 August clash was Lt John E Bakalar, who accounted for three fighters in his first ever combat sortie! He would not score again.

Other pilots to taste success in this engagement included Lt Charles E Brown, who 'bagged' two before he was forced to bail out (he also returned to the 354th a few days later), and Lt Woodfin Marcellus Sullivan, whose two Fw 190s took his final wartime tally to four destroyed and one damaged. Sullivan was lucky to return to base, for he got so low during one of his combats that he severely damaged his Mustang's wing when he hit a tree!

The following day (17th) Capt Warren Emerson led eight P-51s from the 355th FS on a morning escort for a squadron of P-47s bombing targets in the Dreux area. Upon rendezvousing with the Thunderbolts, Emerson spied two Fw 190s preparing to attack from above. He chased the two German fighters through scattered cloud from 3000 to 4000 ft, before hitting the trailing aircraft with a solid burst of fire as it made its way into the overcast. Although one of the pilots in the flight saw the aircraft go into a spin and crash, 'Red' Emerson failed to get this kill officially confirmed. He emerged from the clouds to find himself right behind a second Fw 190, and several bursts of fire knocked pieces off the aeroplane and the pilot bailed out. There was no doubt about this one being confirmed.

As Patton's Third Army broke out and rolled on toward Paris, the 354th found itself flying continuous patrols to protect its flanks. Capt Verlin Chandler led the 356th FS on a fighter sweep in the Paris area on 18 August, and during the course of the mission the squadron enjoyed great success. Chandler later reported;

'We circled the Beauvais airdrome looking for aircraft. Helium Red Three called in some aircraft parked towards the edge of a forest on the side of the airdrome. We made three passes at them. I opened fire from about 400 yards, and fired up to about 100 yards. When I left, the plane I had fired at was burning. I claim this Me 109 as destroyed (before leaving, the formation had claimed seven Bf 109s destroyed - Editor).

'About 80 miles east of Épernay I was looking over a suspicious landing field when I noticed eight aircraft taxi out and start to take off. I waited until six planes were airborne before I called Helium flight and started down after them. No 8 wasn't airborne so I skipped him and started firing at No 7, who was just getting his wheels up. I fired from about 300 yards



Despite not making it to the frontline until mid 1944, Kenn Dahlberg was none the less an experienced pilot, having served as an instructor in the US for a full year. His transition training prior to him joining the group was conducted on the P-47, although this did not stop him from quickly mastering the P-51B once in the ETO. Dahlberg was shot down no less than three times during his eight months with the 354th FG, successfully evading capture once (on 16 August 1944). His luck finally ran out on 14 February 1945, when he was captured after bailing out over enemy territory for a second time (USAAF)

from dead astern up to 50 yards and then I had to pull up to avoid a collision. When I rolled over and looked down, the plane had crashed and was burning on the edge of the field that he had just taken off from. I claim this Me 109 as destroyed.

'I then saw another Me 109 on the tail of a P-51, so I called the pilot and told him to keep turning while I made a pass at the '109. I fired from about 200 yards, with about 30 degrees of deflection. I saw a number of strikes. The Me 109 rolled over and the canopy fell away, but the pilot did not bail out. The '109 crash-landed in a field. The pilot got out and ran into a forest. I strafed the plane and set it on fire. I claim this '109 as destroyed.'

Aside from Verlin Chandler's two Bf 109s shot down, Lt Frederick Warner was also credited with two Messerschmitt fighters destroyed, while three others were shared amongst the rest of the flights.

On 24 August Gen Hoyt Vandenberg, Commander of the Ninth Air Force, paid his first visit to the 354th. During his time at A-31, Vandenberg presented the group with its first Distinguished Unit Citation (sometimes called a Presidential Citation) for outstanding performance of duty in action against the enemy from 4 November 1943 through to 15 May 1944. Decorations were also awarded to many of the pilots who had distinguished themselves flying with the first Mustang fighter group in the ETO.

The day after Gen Vandenberg's visit Allied troops arrived in Paris. While celebrations took place on the streets of the city, for the 354th it was business as usual, and on this occasion the group went after the Luftwaffe on its remaining airfields north of the city. Badly aggrieved by the fall of the French capital, the enemy chose to rise to the challenge thrown down by the group, and thus allow the 354th FG to achieve its greatest single-day victory tally of the entire war.

It all started on the first fighter sweep of the day, led off from A-31 at 0810 hrs by Maj Robert Stephens. The 16 Mustangs of the 355th FS were heading for Beauvais and Épernay when, just north of Reims, they were attacked by a mixed force of 20 Bf 109s and Fw 190s. Maj Stephens

P-51B-10 43-7136 ZAT TOO FAST!
gleams in the early evening sun
during the late spring of 1944.
Despite the aircraft's nickname,
serial and codes all being clearly
visible, it has proven impossible to
trace who flew this immaculate
machine (USAAF)



quickly downed two Focke-Wulf fighters, boosting his overall tally to 13. Nearby, Lt Bill Davis had gone into a Lufbery with an Fw 190, and after a few turns he pulled his nose through, fired and the enemy pilot jettisoned his canopy and bailed out. Davis then gave chase to a second Bf 109 and had seen his rounds strike home when he ran out of ammunition! Capt Maurice Long had to finish the fighter off.

By then the latter pilot had already downed an Fw 190 in the initial attack and shot another off the tail of a Mustang, before completing the job on Davis's Bf 109. Long's haul of 2.5 kills gave him an overall tally of 5.25, allowing him to join the ranks of the 354th's fighter elite - these were also his last claims of the war.

A total of nine enemy fighters had been destroyed during the clash, and the only Mustang that failed to return from the sweep was downed by flak encountered on the way home.

The second successful mission of the day involved Maj Richard Turner, his 356th FS and a German airfield near Beauvais. A fuel truck and at least seven Fw 190s parked in a large hangar were spotted off to one side of the field, and on its first low pass the squadron took out the tanker. The hangar duly caught fire thanks to the blazing truck, and the blaze quickly spread to the Fw 190s. A further three aircraft were also destroyed by the strafers, and other hangars and installations were left in flames.



Maj Robert Stephens was made CO of the 355th FS in April 1944, and he remained in command until declared tour-expired in September. His tally of 13 kills made him the squadron's second ranking ace. Remaining in the air force post-war, Stephens died while still on active service in April 1960 (USAAF)

The 355th FS undertook its second mission of the day at 1704 hrs when Capt Warren Emerson led a dozen Mustangs on a fighter sweep of the Reims area. Here, they encountered 15 Fw 190s. The aircraft had just begun to split off into individual dogfights when two more groups of about 30 Bf 109s and Fw 190s joined in the battle.

At this point Capt Emerson had to break off his first combat with a Focke-Wulf in order to meet the onslaught of the newcomers, quickly latching onto the tail of an Fw 190 and shooting it down. He then switched his attention to another Fw 190 that was chasing a P-51, and as the German pilot pulled up into a steep climbing turn, Emerson hit his canopy area with a few shots and the aircraft caught fire. The Mustang pilot pulled up above the Fw 190, stalled out and came back down so close to the Focke-Wulf that he dented his wingtip!

Emerson then went after a third Fw 190, but as he dived towards his foe he saw tracers off his wing. Immediately breaking off his attack, he turned and saw aircraft wreckage in the air and a parachute blossoming above it. Emerson quickly realised that his wingman, Lt McClure, who had been with him through all of his earlier combats, had been shot down. Fortunately McClure evaded capture and returned to A-31 about two weeks later.

Joining up with two other Mustangs, Emerson climbed back into the fight. The three P-51s were then attacked by two Bf 109s, and he manoeuvred himself around one of the Messerschmitts and saw good hits that set its drop tank on fire. The pilot bailed out, giving Emerson a score of three victories for the day (and his last of the war), thus making him an ace with six kills.

Lt William King also scored three times in the ruckus, all of his kills being Fw 190s. The first was sent down in an inverted spin, the second was abandoned by its pilot after King had hit the fighter with just a handful of rounds, and the third tried to shake the Mustang pilot off, but to no avail. Like Emerson, King's three kills were his last claims of the conflict, and they boosted his tally to 5.5 victories.

Capt Virgil Dietrich, who had been leading a flight when 'Red' Emerson initially engaged the first enemy formation, had sighted the additional Luftwaffe fighter force as they entered the fray and duly attacked them. He swiftly manoeuvred onto the tail of an Fw 190 and, after firing a series of short bursts, the pilot bailed out. Dietrich (who finished his tour with four kills) then chased another all the way to Calais, but could not shoot it down.

Lt Robert Foye was also leading a flight that got caught up with a formation of Fw 190s, and he destroyed one in the initial attack. Returning home with his wingman, Foye heard a call from Emerson and went back to investigate. As he approached, an Fw 190 turned in front of him, so he fired and the enemy fighter went straight in. Foye then latched onto the tail of a third Fw 190, and it was only after he had completed a few turns with the German aircraft that he discovered he was out of ammunition, so he broke off the combat and returned home.

Three pilots besides Lt McClure did not return from the battle, Lt Norman Mayse last being seen in combat with an enemy aircraft, Lt George Hoehn bailing out but evading capture and Lt Harold Gray (who was Lt Foye's wingman) being shot down and killed after the initial engagement.

The last big fight of the day occurred later that afternoon when the 356th FS ventured out on yet another fighter sweep. A large formation of enemy fighters was discovered west of Reims, and the Mustang pilots attacked. Lt Bart Tenore describes the action;

'I was leading Green Flight when our squadron bounced a large formation of Me 109s and Fw 190s, which passed under us at about 3000 ft. White Leader led his flight to the left, attacking a group of '190s, and I split-essed onto about 15 Me 109s. The E/A headed for the deck, and only one of them attempted to turn into us. He made a half-hearted head-on pass but did not open fire, instead rejoining the formation, which flew line abreast down a valley. I opened fire on the first '109 on the right-hand side of the formation and got hits on the fuselage and radiator coolers. He crashed in a wood. I then took on the next ship in the formation and fired dead astern on him. He was flying above the tree tops, and as I followed him over a small knoll, I saw him hit the ground and explode.'

'I then moved into position behind a third '109 and got some hits. He crashed in front of me and I had to pull up to avoid hitting the debris. As I was attacking the third ship, I was flying line abreast with another '109, which Lt McIntire said flew into the ground right next to me. We tailed the last '109 for a long time, and I registered a few hits with the one gun I had left firing. When my ammo ran out, Lt McIntire moved into position to fire, but the 109 outclimbed us as McIntire scored some hits with his last remaining gun.'

This massacre resulted in a dozen confirmed victories for the men of the 356th. Besides Lt Tenore's three (of an eventual score of four, one probable

Capt 'Mike' Rogers points to his *Beamtown Banshee*, alias P-51B-7 43-6833, at A-2 in August 1944. He scored most of his seven kills in this machine, and Ken Dahlberg also claimed his first two victories with it on 22 and 29 June (USAAF)





and 1.5 damaged during his ETO tour), Lt Francis McIntire was credited with three (of an eventual score of 4.5 and 0.5 damaged during his ETO tour) and Lts Clyde D Sharman and Robert Lester got doubles. The total score for the day was 24 destroyed in the air for the 355th FS and 12 in the air and 10 on the ground for the 356th FS.

For the rest of the month squadron-strength fighter sweeps continued to be flown, but the only one that encountered any kind of opposition from the Luftwaffe came on 28 August. Maj Stephens was leading a patrol in the vicinity of Chalons, Reims and Soisson when his Mustangs were bounced by some 50 Fw 190s and Bf 109s over Épernay. Stephens duly destroyed a Messerschmitt in a climbing Lufbery for his 13th, and last kill of the war. His combat report stated;

'The Jerry had made the mistake of trying to turn with our Lufbery. In doing this he lost his speed advantage and couldn't get away. I got on his tail and had him in my sights when he half rolled. I rolled after him. Then, before I fired a shot, he bailed out.'

Elsewhere, Capt Lendon Buer, leading Blue Flight, had attacked six Bf 109s that were diving on White Flight, which broke on Buer's call. He took the tail-end Bf 109 and went into a climbing turn after it. A rolling fight ensued until the enemy aircraft suffered a number of telling strikes and dove into a forest.

After a slow start, August 1944 had become a very productive month for the 354th FG. The group's pilots had scored 72 aerial victories and claimed the destruction of 38 aircraft on the ground, but this success had come at a high price. No fewer than 18 pilots had been shot down, although the good news was that seven of them had returned to the group before the end of the month.

Lt Robert Lester's P-51D-20 44-64040
Lil' Mike THE 4th was on strength with the 356th FS in the early autumn of 1944. Just who claimed the 5.5 kills marked below the fighter's cockpit remains unclear, as Lester is not listed as having been an ace (USAAF)

STALEMATE

By September the bulk of the German Army in the west had moved back behind the Moselle River and established a series of defensive positions around the fort city of Metz. The Luftwaffe had also pulled its fighter units back to airfields in the Third Reich in order to defend both industrial targets and cities alike against near daily heavy bomber raids. In the wake of these tactical withdrawals, the only German stronghold remaining in the west was the Brest peninsula.

The 354th FG was now kept busy flying continual fighter sweeps over this area, seeking out pockets of enemy resistance on the ground and very occasionally encountering the Luftwaffe in the air, which was usually conspicuous by its absence. The first part of the month was marred by rain, but once the weather improved numerous dive-bombing missions were flown against the besieged garrison at Brest. Another thing that hindered the group when it came to engaging the Luftwaffe was the sheer distance that now separated its base from the aerial action that was routinely taking place over the frontline. However, the 354th FG would soon experience yet another move, taking it far closer to the German border.

What more pastoral setting would be possible than a cow staked out on a fighter field? Although this photograph was taken at Lashenden in the spring of 1944, it is indicative of the rustic lifestyle led by the 354th FG for its final 12 months in the ETO. The two P-51Bs behind the bovine beast were assigned to the 356th FS (USAAF)





All the comforts of home, including the kitchen, or should that be bathroom, sink. A youthful looking 1Lt Kenn Dahlberg lathers up prior to shaving from his moveable lavatory! One of the oldest (at 27) and most experienced flyers (he had over 1000 hours in his logbook, much of which he accrued as an instructor) assigned to the 354th FG, Dahlberg joined the group just days prior to its move to France (Dahlberg)

There was one bright spot early in the month, which occurred during an armed reconnaissance mission on 10 September flown by Lts Carl Bickel and Harold Price. The pair had attempted to strafe a train near Saarbrücken, which had beaten into a nearby tunnel. As they pulled up, Bickel sighted a He 111 bomber flying west at 1000 ft. The Mustang pilot easily caught the Heinkel and set it on fire with two long bursts, but before he could finish it off he was driven away by heavy flak. Price then sighted Bickel's wounded prey moments later, and he duly finished it off with two long bursts. Despite having only 'winged' the He 111, Carl Bickel was duly credited with a full kill, taking his overall tally to 5.5, and thus giving him ace status. This would be his final claim of the war.

The big day of the month came 48 hours later when Capt Charles Brown led a sweep over Koblenz and nearby Linburg airfield. At the latter site, two flights from the 353rd FS strafed Ju 88s and Fw 190s parked on the edge of the field, destroying eight of them.

The Mustangs then climbed to about 9000 ft and headed for Frankfurt. En route, they sighted about 40 Fw 190s flying some 2000 ft below them. Above the Focke-Wulf fighters were a further 30 Bf 109s with drop tanks. Whilst the bulk of the P-51s dove down and attacked the Fw 190s, Capt Brown and his flight immediately began climbing after the Bf 109s. He was not able to down any of them in the subsequent whirl of combat, however, although he did succeed in breaking up the formation and keeping them away from the other Mustangs. Brown also radioed in flights from the 355th FS, which then joined in the air battle.

2Lt Bruce Carr had set fire to two Ju 88s during the strafing run on the airfield and had followed his flight up to 9000 ft when the Fw 190s were sighted. He later reported;

'My flight was closest to them so I made a bounce on the rear of the enemy formation. At this point Lt John E Miller left my flight and was not seen after that. The Fw 190 that I picked out broke in a sharp climbing turn to the left. I fired a 30-degree deflection shot from 150 to 100 yards. I got many strikes on the left wing and around the engine. This ship seemed to explode and became enveloped in flames. The pilot immediately bailed out.

'I then saw a lone Fw 190 on the deck trying to get away from the fight. I dived after him and fired a short burst at about 30 degrees deflection from about 250 yards. I saw a few strikes and he started a turn to the left. I closed to about 150 yards, fired again and got strikes on his engine and around the cockpit. As I fired he snapped to the left on his back and flew into a hill.'

Two 356th FS stalwarts, Capt 'Pinky' O'Connor (left) and Maj Richard Turner enjoy a drink at the bar following a long day's flying in mid-1944. Both men had joined the squadron upon its formation, and would invariably fly with each other in combat once in the ETO. Turner was declared tour-expired ahead of O'Connor, who continued to fly until shot down and captured on 5 November 1944. His loss hit his buddy Turner hard, as he recounted in his volume, *Mustang Pilot*;

'The loss of Frank O'Connor in combat was a real blow to the entire Group. His ability, loyalty and innate personal kindness had endeared him to the men and officers alike of the entire fighter group. I remember the letter I received in the States informing me of his being shot down. I didn't know at the time that he was unhurt and safe, and I cried bitter tears as I grieved for one of the finest friends I was ever to know. The joy I experienced a few months later and the spiritual lift knew no bounds when I learned that he was alive and healthy' (USAAF)

'I then climbed back up to about 6000 ft, where I saw an Fw 190 diving for the deck 80 degrees off the direction I was flying in. I turned right and fired a very short burst at 80 degrees deflection from 300 yards. I saw hits all around the cockpit. The E/A steepened its dive, rolled over on its back and went in. The pilot did not get out.'

'I climbed back up to about 10,000 ft and ran into about 30+ Me 109s. There were too many for me, and I saw a P-51 below me smoking. I was afraid they would bounce him so I went down and gave him cover. After we had gotten away from the E/A I flew up close to the smoking P-51. It was Lt Robert Reynolds, and he told me over the R/T that he had destroyed three Fw 190s. I gave him cover until his engine caught fire due to a lack of coolant. He bailed out at 5000 ft.'

Abandoning his P-51B-10 (42-106597) north-east of Luxembourg, the 20-year-old ace (his triple haul had boosted his tally to seven kills) descended safely to become a prisoner of war. Bruce Carr, meanwhile, returned home alone, having taken his own score to 4.5 kills.

Another 353rd pilot to enjoy a successful day was Lt Dahlberg, who had previously claimed a three-kill haul on 16 August to 'make ace'. On 12 September he went one better, as he stated in his combat report;

'On my strafing run I was going so fast I couldn't aim. When we reformed at 7000 ft we sighted 40 Fw 190s and took off after them.'

Dahlberg quickly downed his first two Focke-Wulf fighters with accurate strikes on their respective cockpit areas. He continued;

'They both blew up with the first burst. As I pulled up from the second one, I got on the tail of another Fw 190. As we started to climb up I cut his right wing off with my bullets. He bailed out. I looked around and saw an Fw 190 riddling a P-51, who in turn was shooting at another '190. I dropped down to give a hand, got some hits around the canopy and the Jerry went flying into the ground.'



When the fight was over Dahlberg had scored four times, Carr and Lts Omer Culbertson and Robert Reynolds had achieved the 'hat trick' with three apiece while Capt Virgil Dietrich and Lt Melvin Thayer were credited with doubles. In all, some 22 Fw 190s had been downed for the loss of two Mustangs.

The next big event of the month was the move to ALG A-66 at Orconte, on the Marne River. Aircraft were parked on grass, and the runway consisted of heavy sheets of tarpaper applied directly onto the grass. Upon arrival, personnel from the group joined in a mad scramble for lumber to build what they could to improve their tent quarters.

The only other aerial action for the month took place on 26 September when Lts Ira Bunting and Clifford Dean shared in the destruction of a Bf 109 while on a sweep in the Wessel area.

Later that day Lt Francis McIntire was leading an aerial patrol in the Arnhem area when he was vectored to Dusseldorf. On arrival, he found a number of Bf 109s engaged in combat with P-38s. Two of the Messerschmitts broke away from the fight following the appearance of the P-51s and attempted to flee, but Lts McIntire and Harriman Thompson chased them down. Thompson quickly overhauled his target, gave it a blast and the Bf 109 went straight in. He then caught up to the second Bf 109, opened fire but overran the fighter. Trailing Thompson, McIntire came in for his shot and saw strikes on the Bf 109, although the German fighter continued on its way. Finally, Thompson pulled in behind the Messerschmitt for a second time and finished it off.

On the return journey home, McIntire spotted a lone Bf 109 'on the deck' and downed it at minimum gun range.

The last combat of the month took place on the 28th. Lt Robert L Young of the 356th FS had been participating in a sweep over Germany when his element leader's P-51 developed engine trouble and he escorted

Although deemed to be less capable of withstanding flak damage than the P-47, the Mustang could nevertheless take a beating, as this close up (see also page 95) of an unidentified 356th FS P-51D clearly shows. The fighter had been hit by at least four 7.92 mm machine gun rounds in the starboard windshield - just as well they were not 20 mm cannon shells! (USAAF)



him home. Along the way, a lone Fw 190 was sighted flying some 6000 ft below them, so Young dived after it and shot the fighter down - the P-51 pilot later remarked in his combat report that his German counterpart had probably never even seen his attacker.

October was plagued with more bad weather, although the group attacked a number of rail targets, both through dive-bombing and strafing. It also flew a few escort missions for B-26s, although the vast majority of the missions performed were armed reconnaissance sweeps, attacking targets of opportunity. And the latter were now becoming scarce too, with the enemy building up its defences for the impending fight for the Homeland.

It was not until the end of the month that the 354th met the Luftwaffe in the skies, and a spectacular air battle ensued. Capt Glenn Eagleston was leading the group on a bombing mission, targeting German airfields, when the Mustangs met a large force of Bf 109s. Eagleston reported;

'The group was proceeding on course at 1130 hrs when "Ripsaw" (ground control) informed me of a large number of bogies at 12 o'clock to the group, east of Durlach. I sighted the bogies at 1140 hrs, nine o'clock to our group, and going in the opposite direction some 2000 ft above us. The bogies made a wide diving turn and came in on us at six o'clock from slightly above. When definite recognition as enemy Me 109s had been made, I waited until the enemy gaggle had almost set itself for a bounce

Maj Richard Turner poses with his well-worn P-51D-5 44-13561 in the autumn of 1944. This aircraft was the major's first assigned 'bubble top' Mustang, and its scoreboard features not only his 11 aerial kills but also his eight damaged claims. Turner scored just one victory with this machine, namely a Bf 109 on 30 July 1944. This would also prove to be his final kill of the war
(via Michael O'Learv)





This overall view of 44-13561 **SHORT-FUSE SALLEE** was taken sometime after the shot opposite, and shows how Maj Turner's scoreboard appeared in his final weeks in the ETO. Note that the number of swastikas has now increased to 20, which perhaps reflects the addition of his V1 successes. Turner was quoted after the war as having said 'I fought one war with the Nazis and another with the Victory Credits Review Board! This comment no doubt related to his frustration in having some of his victory claims downgraded to damaged. Interestingly, during the course of completing 96 combat missions in the ETO, Turner never once claimed a probable kill (W Louie)

and then called a group turn of 180 degrees to the left to meet the attack head-on. I ordered the group to jettison bombs and proceeded to attack. E/A formation was very well spread out and semi-line abreast in flights of four and eight. Estimated strength, 60+.

I encountered a single Me 109 at about 10,000 ft and tacked on to him, but I had trouble catching this E/A so I fired a short burst at 45 degrees without observing strikes. I then fired a one-second burst at 30 degrees and observed strikes on the fuselage and left wing root, and the E/A started smoking. After this I pulled up astern, zero degrees and fired a two-second burst from 100 yards. The E/A started to burn and the pilot bailed out.

Observing a flight of four Me 109s at 11,000 ft, I bounced these E/A and fired a one-second burst at the No 4 man, observing a few strikes on his fuselage. The E/A broke into me and started a climbing turn. This pilot was particularly aggressive, and showed no desire to run. I was also amazed at the performance of the E/A, which showed climbing and turning ability far above any Me 109 that I had ever encountered. I rat-raced this E/A for about five minutes without getting into a shooting position. Finally, this E/A pulled straight up and I closed to 100 yards and fired a two-second burst into him, scoring many strikes on the fuselage. The E/A started to smoke badly and pieces came off. It fell into a slow spin and burst into flames. I observed this aircraft crash and explode. The pilot did not get out.

By this time the E/A were split up and coming in from all directions so that it was very necessary to keep looking around. My wingman, Lt Frederick I Couch, had been unable to release his bombs, yet in spite of this he had stayed in an excellent covering position through severe and violent manoeuvring, making it possible for me to concentrate on my targets. I observed a single Me 109 at about 10,000 ft, slightly above and climbing, going in the opposite direction. I pulled up underneath him with the E/A almost in a loop and fired a two-second burst from about 100 yards



A huddle of aces from the 354th FG.
These pilots are, clockwise
beginning with the man with the
number 5 on his chest, 'Buzz'
Beerbower (15.5 kills, KIA 9 August
1944), Wallace Emmer (14 kills, died
in captivity 15 February 1945), Robert
Goodnight (7.25 kills), 'Pinky'
O'Connor (10.75 kills), 'Brue'
Brueland (12.5 kills). Carl Frantz (11
kills), Edward Hunt (6.5 kills), Richard
Turner (11 kills), Robert Stephens (13
kills), 'Eagle' Eagleston (18.5 kills)
and Jack Bradley (15 kills) (USAAF)

at almost a 90-degree deflection, scoring many strikes directly under the cockpit. The E/A started to burn and fell off in a spin. The pilot bailed out and his E/A crashed and exploded.

'The enemy pilots varied from aggressive to very aggressive, and appeared to be highly experienced. Instead of operating in their usual gaggle formation, they tried at all times to stay in four- and eight-ship flights.'

Eagleston had been accurate in his description of the opposition, for the 354th had encountered the *Stab*. (Headquarters flight), as well as II., III. and IV. *Gruppen* of JG 53. The air battle lasted about 35 minutes, and the results were amazingly close to what was claimed. The Mustang pilots were credited with 21 kills, which was exactly the number of Bf 109s that JG 53 admitted losing! Ten pilots were killed and four wounded, and included amongst the former was IV./JG 53's *Gruppenkommandeur*, Hauptmann Morr. A *staffel* commander was also killed during the engagement. The pilots of JG 53 claimed eight P-51s destroyed, compared with four actually lost by the group. High scorers for the day were Capt Eagleston with three (taking his tally to 15.5 kills), Capt Harry Fisk with three (boosting his score



Another view of the 356th FS P-51D seen in close up on page 91. This photograph reveals that the damage sustained by the fighter's starboard wing flap was clearly inflicted by 20 mm cannon rounds, rather than the 7.62 mm machine gun 'slugs' that struck the windscreen (USAAF)



His gaunt face clearly showing the strain, a tired-looking Maj Frank 'Pinky' O'Connor enjoys his first post-mission cigarette following yet another armed reconnaissance flight over enemy territory. A veteran of 59 missions in the ETO by the time he was shot down and captured on 5 November 1944, O'Connor survived the deadly intentions of German fighters, flak and incensed peasantry, only to succumb to emphysema in February 1985 (USAAF)



This Chevrolet G4100 1 1/2-ton 4x4 was used by the 354th FG as a mobile control tower in France. It is seen here surrounded by mud on a typically grey and misty day at Orconte (A-66) in late 1944 following the infamous flood (W Louie)

Mud was very conducive to accidents, as the pilot of this unidentified P-51D found out when he left the runway and wound up in a real mess at A-66. Judging by the angle of the tailplane and the missing outer wing sections, this aircraft would have been declared fit only for salvage (USAAF)

Fortunately, he was not injured, and the balance of the group continued on their mission attacking airfields.

One site that was hit was Schwabisch Hall, which was battered with 500-lb bombs and then strafed - at least six aircraft were set on fire. Lt Hayden Holton of the 353rd FS participated in this attack, dropping his ordnance directly onto a hardstanding in front of a hangar packed with aircraft. The P-51s then continued over to Crailsheim airfield, and as they approached the target a train appeared on the edge of the field and Holton blasted it, sending steam shooting high into the air. The 353rd then proceeded to attack the field, destroying several Me 163s and Bf 110s.

The 355th and 356th FSs, meanwhile, had hit Sachsenheim as well as Crailsheim, and upon returning to A-66, the group was credited with having destroyed 28 enemy aircraft on the ground, including ten jets. However, this did not compensate for the one loss of the day, 10.75-kill ace Maj Frank O'Connor. His Mustang (P-51D-5 44-14016) had been



squarely hit by flak, forcing the CO of the 356th FS to pull up in a zoom climb from low level and bail out. Upon landing, O'Connor only survived the attentions of an angry civilian mob through the timely intervention of a Luftwaffe sergeant from the base that he had just attacked! He was duly packed off to become a PoW. With the loss of Maj O'Connor, Capt Earl Depner took over the reins of the 356th FS.

The rainy weather that had stalled American attacks on the German lines also caused problems for the 354th. When Patton's Third Army began its offensive on the Saar River the dam on the Marne River overflowed, which in turn caused the group's airfield to become flooded. Nearly all the 354th's buildings, as well as the tent living areas, were largely inundated, yet with ground installations literally floating around A-66, the pilots continued their attacks on German airfields.

The group received what many considered to be the worst blow in its short history on 13 November. The men were told that they would be giving up their P-51 Mustangs for Republic P-47 Thunderbolts! They could not believe it, but it was true. The P-47s were due to arrive shortly so that pilots and groundcrews could familiarise themselves with the big radial-engined fighter. And to make matters worse, the unit was forced to vacate a soggy A-66 for nearby A-65 (Perthes), a defunct German installation with terrible conditions, on the 14th. Once at the latter site the men performed their tasks as best they could, while trying to dry their things out.

Some good news was announced the following day, however. The 354th would be moving to A-98 at Rosières-en-Haye, about six miles north of Toul, and some ten miles north-west of Nancy. The depressing event of the day was the arrival of the first Thunderbolts for the pilots to begin their orientation on.

The charismatic Gen George Patton (left), commander of the 3rd Army, is seen here in conversation with Lt Col Jack Bradley (deputy CO of the 354th FG) and Maj Gen Otto P Weyland, Commanding General of XIX TAC, in early 1945. Patton made a point of personally thanking the 354th for its ceaseless support during the Battle of the Bulge (USAAF)



The only aerial combat for the month occurred on the 17th while seeking out a rail junction to bomb. The pilots dropped their ordnance on a double rail line between Achern and Spenweiler, severing the tracks. Bf 109s then attacked the P-51s as they were pulling out of their dives, and Lt Clifford Davis claimed one of them shot down in flames. Later in the day Lt Richard Poole Jr and Maj Marshall Cloak were attacked by a swarm of enemy fighters, and the former downed one Bf 109 before he was shot down and Cloak claimed two.

Dive-bombing missions continued despite terrible weather, and several aircraft were lost not only to German flak but to the rain and wind which made flying a real hazard.

The aircraft began their move to Rosières-en-Haye on 25 November, the new camp taking shape rapidly, with living quarters mounted on planking and rigged for cold, winter weather.

On the afternoon of 26 November, four Thunderbolts from the 356th FS took to the sky to perform the first P-47 mission flown by the 354th FG. Bad weather kept the group grounded for the rest of the month.

The group had flown just 34 missions during November and destroyed about 50 enemy aircraft on the ground. Only two confirmed aerial victories were added to the scoreboard, while a further 12 pilots had been lost to flak

THUNDERBOLT BLUES

While the conversion to P-47s certainly had a great effect on the morale of the men of the 354th, it did not affect their devotion to duty and their determination to see the job through to the end of the conflict in Europe. The group's re-equipment with the rugged Thunderbolt signalled an end to armed reconnaissance missions where pilots went looking for trouble in the air. The 354th's primary duty now was dive-bombing, strafing and supporting troops on the ground.

By the first week of December the 355th FS had also finished its conversion onto the P-47 and had started flying combat missions, but the

Two P-47D-28S of the 353rd FS are seen undergoing routine servicing and re-arming by squadron armourers at the unit's Rosières-en-Haye base in late January 1945. The 353rd was the last of the three units within the 354th FG to transition from the Mustang to the Thunderbolt. Note the victory symbols painted forward of the cockpit on the fighter running up in the background. Such markings were a rare sight on 354th FG P-47s, for few pilots scored aerial kills with the Thunderbolt during the type's brief service with the group (USAAF)





A newly built flak tower dominates the skyline in this view of one of the last 353rd FS P-51Ds being serviced at Rosières-en-Haye in the first week of December 1944. This aircraft appears to be having its port inner Browning machine gun changed, for the barrel of the 0.50-cal weapon is absent from this particular gun port. A quartet of four 'fifties' could also be found atop to the flak tower (USAAF)

Veteran ace Capt George Lamb of the 356th FS belly-landed his P-47D-28 onto the frozen ground at Rosières-en-Haye at the end of a combat sortie in early 1945 (W Louie)

353rd FS was still very much in a transitional phase, and was therefore still conducting sorties with its last remaining P-51s. And it was whilst flying one of these final dive-bombing missions with the Mustang that on 1 December the unit engaged a gaggle of 30 Bf 109s. The German pilots dropped their belly tanks and prepared to scrap with the 353rd, and in the dogfight that ensued three Messerschmitts were downed - two of them by the unit's pilot of the moment, Capt Ken Dahlberg. In return, the 353rd lost a single Mustang to flak.

Practically all the missions flown for the next few days involved dive-bombing and armed reconnaissance, as the 354th sought suitable ground targets to attack. On 16 December the group made further use of a weapon it had initially employed with devastating effect during the attacks on German strongholds on the Brest peninsula in September - napalm. A refined petroleum jelly that was pumped into standard underwing drop





tanks, napalm exploded when it hit the ground, showering the enemy with a wave of scorching heat and flames. While there was some opposition to its use on humanitarian grounds, napalm proved to be a hugely effective way of neutralising isolated pockets of resistance which had been bypassed by the Allied advance.

The entire complexion of the frontline over which the 354th FG had been flying on a near daily basis changed drastically on 16 December following the launching of Field Marshal Karl Gerd von Rundstedt's surprise panzer offensive. Masked by bad weather, which kept virtually all Allied aircraft on the ground, German forces broke through poorly

Not all the Thunderbolts supplied to the 354th FG were new P-47D-28s and -30s, as this shot of a Malcolm-hooded P-47D-22 clearly shows. The star-spangled stripe around the fighter's nose marks its assignment to the 356th FS (*W Louie*)

Mechanics work on the bulky Pratt & Whitney R-2800 radial engine fitted to the P-47 - an altogether different beast from the inline V-1650 of the P-51B/D(USAAF)





Taxying as one on a squadron-strength sweep, the 353rd FS prepare to depart from Rosières-en-Haye in late January 1945. The P-47D-28 closest to the camera was flown by ace 1 Lt Loyd Overfield, who claimed two Bf 109s with it during the famous 19 December 1944 clash (via Jerry Scutts)

Capt Kenn Dahlberg (left) was the most experienced P-47 pilot in the 354th FG in late 1944, having transitioned onto the type in the US immediately prior to reaching the ETO. Here, he observes armourers loading the guns of his P-47 (USAAF)

defended American lines and pushed forward to form a pocket into Allied territory, where they were finally halted during the legendary 'Battle of the Bulge'. However, both during and immediately after the offensive, the 354th had a full-time job assisting the hard-pressed GIs on the ground by flying numerous bombing and strafing sorties.

Despite all this flying, the men of the 354th soon began to wonder if they would ever score another aerial victory. Finally, on 17 December, 353rd FS Operations Officer, and

five-kill ace, Maj James Dalglisch spotted an Me 410 taking off from an enemy airfield. A diving attack put him on the tail of the twin-engined aircraft, which he shot down. This was Dalglisch's first kill since commencing his second tour with the 354th FG in mid October, having previously served with the 355th FS until declared tour-expired at the end of June.

This lone Me 410 was also the first aerial victory scored by the 354th with the P-47.

The following day the 355th FS flew a mission in heavy fog, but the weather made the target impossible to locate. The Thunderbolt pilots did spot a dozen Fw 190s dive-bombing US troops east of Düren, however, and three German fighters were downed for the loss of two P-47s.

M marginally better weather conditions on the 19th allowed Capt Kenn Dahlberg to lead four flights from the 353rd FS on a dive-bombing mission against the HQ of the 116th Panzer Division south-west of Prüm;



This 356th FS Thunderbolt has just had the snow shovelled away from its undercarriage in preparation for its next mission. Still grasping his shovel, a weary groundcrewman takes a break after completing the job. Appropriately named 355th FS pilot Lt Donald Snow summed up the group's early P-47 experience as follows;

'Nasty rumours made their way into camp in early November - our squadron was to fly P-47s. Spirits of both crewmen and pilots dropped to a low. It was quite a come down at first for an outfit whose whole core had been formed around the P-51 Mustang. By the time we moved to our new tent city at A-98, Rosières-en-Haye, near Nancy, our pilots were well on their way to becoming expert throttle-jockeys on our new "Thunderbuckets" (USAAF)

'Twelve of us starred out, but we got jumped by more than forty Messerschmirts and had to drop our bombs in order to fight. I'd like to say right now that the Luftwaffe was successful, because it prevented us from carrying out our bombing mission. You can't manoeuvre a fighter if you're carrying bombs, so we had to dump them or get shot down. Four of our fighters never got into the scrap because our formation was broken up by the intense German flak. Eight of us who did get into the fight knocked down nine Germans.'

Just prior to being bounced by the Bf 109s, Dahlberg had led his charges down through the mist-shrouded hills of the Schnee Eifel, where he was amazed to discover the roads below him jammed solid with German vehicles of all shapes and sizes. He was just about to attack when the Messerschmitts appeared.

These Luftwaffe pilots proved to be both experienced and aggressive, and the Americans had to fight hard to survive. Of the nine victories claimed (four by Dahlberg), only six were confirmed, half of these falling to the flight leader. The 353rd FS suffered the loss of three pilots in the engagement.

At this time practically all the missions being flown by the 354th were in support of embattled American troops in the vicinity of the Belgian town of Bastogne. After a week of terrible weather, consisting of snow, freezing rain and fog, things finally started to improve, and the group escorted a huge formation of C-47s which managed to drop much-needed supplies to the men of the 101st Airborne Division and others who were





Far left

The 356th FS in particular seems to have made full use of the P-47's substantial engine cowlings for a plethora of nose art. The man responsible for all this artwork was groundcrewman Will Louie. In this first shot Capt F P McIntire poses with his P-47D 'AJ-T'. He achieved 4.5 victories flying a series of identically-named P-51s, but failed to score with the P-47, and therefore missed out on achieving ace status by just half a kill! (W Louie)



Left

"KRIS-BEE" was the Thunderbolt flown by Lt Lester Butler of the 356th FS. It was coded 'AJ-V (W Louie)



Far left

Lt John Youngworth was the pilot of *BIG ASS BIRD*, also from the 356th FS. A number of P-47s received this nickname in the various combat theatres in which the Republic fighter saw action (W Louie)



Left

Yet another Thunderbolt assigned to the 356th FS; *SQUAW TOWN SQUASHER*'s pilot and markings remain unknown (W Louie)



Far left

"NO COMPREE!" reflected the 356th's preoccupation with dive-bombing, although the P-47s never went quite as far as Berlin! (W Louie)



Left

Throughout 1944, the 356th FS had boasted a series of P-51s christened *LIL' MIKE*, and the tradition continued with the P-47. Frustratingly, despite this nickname being traceable to at least four fighters in the squadron, it has proven impossible to find out who exactly *Lil' Mike* was! (W Louie)



'Easy does it Major, and a little more to the right'. A helmeted groundcrewman uses hand signals to guide 353rd FS boss Maj Glenn Eagleston along a steel matting taxiway at Rosières-en-Haye following the completion of a sortie (note the empty bomb racks) in early 1945. Like most of the aces within the 354th FG, 'Eagle' Eagleston failed to add to his burgeoning tally of kills during his time on the Thunderbolt. Eagleston's personal aircraft was P-47D-30 44-20473, seen here fully marked up with his eagle motif, scoreboard and distinctive 353rd FS emblem (via Jerry Scuffs)

surrounded at Bastogne. The ever improving weather also allowed the 354th FG to give better support to the troops on the ground.

On the morning of the 24th the 353rd discovered a number of enemy goods wagons near the German border town of Trier, and whilst in the process of attacking them 16 Fw 190s intervened. The Thunderbolts tore into them instead, and succeeded in driving them off. Lt Orin Rawlings was able to down one of the German fighters as they fled.

The ring around Bastogne was finally broken on 26 December, and during one of numerous support missions flown that day, Maj James Dalglish and his flight surprised 20 Fw 190s strafing American troops. They immediately intercepted and broke them up, claiming four of the enemy fighters.

As December came to a close the 354th tallied up the many missions flown - there were 113 of them. Only 16 aerial victories had been scored for the loss of ten of their own, but the pilots had gone all out to support the ground forces, and had seen the German offensive stopped.

On 1 January 1945 the Luftwaffe flew massive low altitude attacks against Allied airfields in Belgium, Holland and northern France. Considerable damage was done, and many Allied aircraft were destroyed, but the Luftwaffe suffered massive losses in return — losses from which it would never recover. Indeed, 300 aircraft and 233 pilots had been lost in the worst single day defeat the Luftwaffe had ever known.

The 354th continued constant attacks against the enemy during the first days of 1945. However, there was great opposition from flak on these sorties, and on the 2nd six missions were flown and four pilots were lost to groundfire.

The good weather did not last, and for several days the 354th was grounded. Snow and overcast skies dominated the entire area, and nothing was seen of the Luftwaffe following its New Year's Day disaster.

As the month came to a close the Germans had been thrown back, and they were now doing their utmost to delay the advance of American troops into the Fatherland. The 354th continued to fly ground support and suffer



losses to flak, but the destruction of enemy equipment and personnel on the roads was impressive. The group managed to fly 79 missions during the month despite being grounded for a total of 17 days. There were no aerial victories, and nine pilots had been lost.

During February there were more ground support missions accompanied by more bad weather, although the temperatures at last began to slowly climb. With spring not too far away, the 354th eagerly awaited the final Allied breakthrough into Germany, which would hopefully end the war in Europe.

With thoughts of victory in mind, the group received tremendous news on 8 February. It was informed that within a week the 354th would be issued with Mustangs once again.

As part of the struggle to gain ground in Germany, napalm began to be used more frequently by the 354th in an effort to break up some of the more stubborn resistance along the frontline. Some small villages were incinerated to dislodge the enemy, and it was on just such a mission on 14 February that the 353rd FS's Capt Kenn Dahlberg was hit by flak and forced to bail out. He had evaded capture once before (in August 1944), but this time the 14-victory ace did not make it back to base, and instead he sat out the rest of the conflict as a PoW.

Ironically, Dahlberg missed the arrival of the first contingent of Mustangs, which came in that afternoon! There was much jubilation in camp that night, for the 354th FG had once again become the 'Pioneer Mustang Group'.

One of the 356th FS's most colourful Thunderbolts was P-47D-30 44-32760 "SHORTY" MIRIAM, which was named after the wife of its pilot, Lt Norman E 'Ned' Davis. He completed 74 missions during his ETO tour, many of which were flown in this aircraft. 44-32760 was maintained by Davis's crew chief, S/Sgt Benny Luttrell (W Louie)

The 'winged' skull and crossbones marking adopted by the 353rd FS for its P-47s was undoubtedly the most striking motif applied en masse to 354th FG aircraft during the group's ETO tour (W Louie)



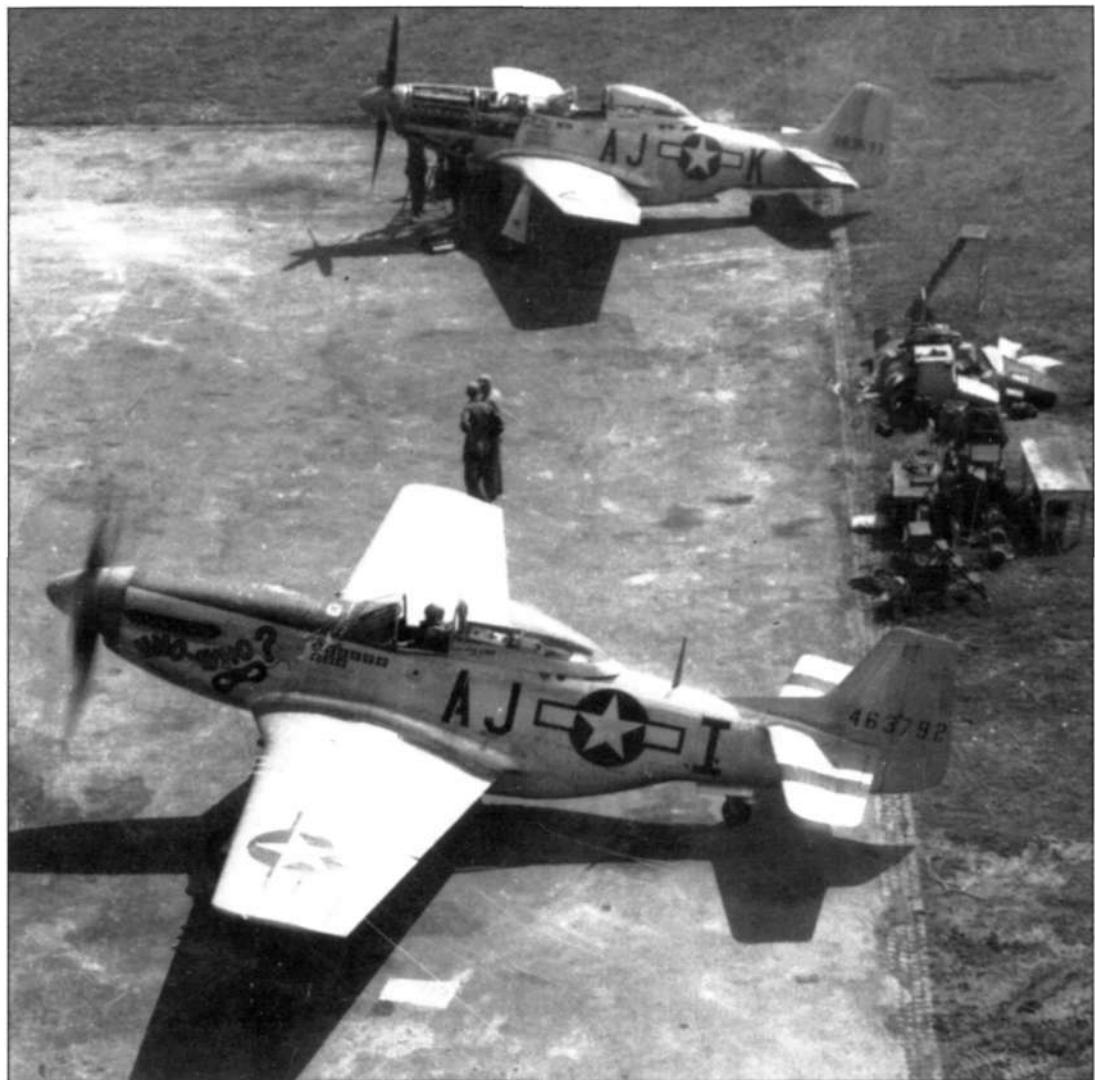
'DEUTSCHLAND KAPUT'

Once the Mustangs arrived at Rosières-en-Haye, the 354th wasted no time in getting them into action. Its squadrons simply parked the unloved P-47s in a quiet corner of the airfield and continued with their missions. From that day on the group was concerned with practically nothing but fighter sweeps and fighter patrols. The first P-51 mission was flown on 16 February 1945, and success came early. The 356th FS, led by Capt Loyd Brandt, had just strafed some locomotives when ground control vectored them onto a gaggle of 'bogies' that had been detected. In the brief combat that ensued three Bf 109s were destroyed, with one losing its tail in a dive and the pilot bailing out of a second fighter before he was even shot at!

The 353rd FS enjoyed its first success with its new mounts on the 22nd when a flight was attacked by three Bf 109s while on a fighter sweep. All of the Messerschmitt fighters fell to the guns of the P-51 pilots. The final days of the month were marred by bad weather, but the group did

Two of the most important types in the Ninth Air Force's wartime arsenal are seen here sitting side-by-side at Ober Olm (Y-64) airfield in April 1945. The P-51s provided fighter cover for the C-47s during Operation Varsity on 24 March in a repeat of the sorties carried out by the 354th on D-Day. The group moved to Y-64 on 8 April, this airfield being the first of two German bases occupied by the 354th. P-51D-20 44-63792 was the last Mustang assigned to 7.5-kill ace Capt Max Lamb of the 356th FS (W Louie)





In this shot of Capt Max Lamb's 44-63792, the P-51's distinctive nose art can be clearly seen - all of his fighters, including his P-47, were nicknamed *UNO-WHO?*. This shot was taken sometime after the photo opposite, and it shows nine kill markings painted below the cockpit. This total reflects not only Lamb's 7.5 confirmed kills, but also his two probables. The P-51D-20 (44-63693) in the background was assigned to Robert Klopotek, who nicknamed it *SNUFFY/The Mad Pole* (W Louie)

Capt George Recagno of the 356th FS poses with his P-51D *Rose Lee*, which he named for his wife, in April 1945. He scored one confirmed and two unconfirmed kills during his ETO tour (Recagno)



"FLAGSHIP" NANCY ANN was almost certainly the last assigned Mustang of 354th FG CO, Col George Bickell. Coded GQ-A', the P-51K-10's serial was 44-12147 (USAAF)



encounter a few of the Luftwaffe's Me 262 jet fighters. Several were damaged but none were destroyed, and ever eager for success, the 354th pilots looked forward to their next encounter with the German jets.

1 March 1945 saw Col George Bickell depart on leave, and Lt Col Jack Bradley step up to command the group in its final two months of war.

Right
An official portrait of Capt Bruno Peters of the 355th FS. He downed an Me 262 on 2 March 1945, and although this kill officially remains unconfirmed, unit records for I/KGI (J) 54 confirm the jet's loss (USAAF)

Below
Maj Gilbert Talbot (seen here during his first tour) led the 355th FS from 26 February 1945 through to VE-Day. He achieved 'aceedom' on 11 April 1945, having scored his first kill over a year earlier (via Cook)



The pilots of the 354th did not have to wait long for another meeting with the Me 262. On the morning of 2 March Capt Bruno Peters of the 355th FS had led a fighter sweep to Fulda and then south to Kassel, where they encountered two Me 262s fighter-bombers of I./KG(J) 54. Diving from 12,000 ft through haze and overcast, Peters caught the first at 1500 ft, while Flt Off Ralph Delgado pursued the second, scoring hits on the jet which caused the pilot to bail out. Apparently, no one saw Peters' victim go in, so it was classified as 'destroyed unconfirmed'. However, I./KG(J) 54 recorded the loss of Feldwebels Heinrich Griem and Gunther Borlitz, both of whom bailed out.

Later in the day the 353rd FS was flying a sweep when Lt Cary Salter radioed in that he had spotted a locomotive stopped at a water tank. Capt Theodore Sedvert led the flight down in a dive from 10,000 ft, but as he dropped through the haze, he spied an Me 262 cruising along. Sedvert pulled behind the jet and hit it with a three-second burst. The fuselage and cockpit took heavy hits, and the pilot started to bail out, his flying overalls visibly in tatters. Seeing that he was too low to take to his parachute, he instead attempted a crash-landing but the jet exploded on impact.

A week passed before any further aerial successes were recorded. While on patrol around noon on 9 March, 353rd ace Lt Bruce Carr caught a careless Fw 190D flying along by itself north-west of Frankfurt and quickly disposed of it. This took Carr's tally to 7.5 kills.

With American troops now across the Rhine River and continuing to advance, there was high hope that the war would soon be over, but in the



Maj Glenn Eagleston was the top scoring ace of the Ninth Air Force with 18.5 aerial victories. Eagleston was CO of the 353rd FS from 26 October 1944 through to 31 May 1945 (USAAF)

Newly promoted Lt Col Glenn Eagleston (left of the mission board) and group CO Lt Col Jack Bradley (on the right) conduct an open air briefing at Ober Olm on 17 April 1945 (USAAF)





Left and below left
355th FS 14.5-kill ace Lowell
Brueland flew a series of Mustangs
named either *WEE SPECK*, *Speck* or
Grim Reaper during his two years
with the 354th FG. *Speck IV*
(P-51D-20 44-63702) was coded
'GQ-U', and Brueland flew this
fighter for much of the summer
of 1944 (USAAF)



For a time 'Brue' Brueland chose
to rename *Wee Speck IV* "Grim
Reaper", but he eventually returned
to his old nickname when the unit
re-equipped with P-47s. Note the
intricately detailed 'grim reaper' just
aft of the exhaust stubs (USAAF)



Maj Brueland poses with his last
WEE SPECK, P-51D-20 44-63702, at
Frankfurt in May 1945. He scored
one confirmed victory and six
unconfirmed destroyed/probable
victories with this machine on 13
and 23 March 1945. Note the 355th
FS badge just visible on the fighter's
fin (USAAF)



Sombrelly named P-51D (sub-type and serial unknown) *MARK EVERY GRAVE*, which belonged to the 355th FS. The identity of the pilot assigned to this aircraft also remains unknown (USAAF)

356th FS Mustangs sit neatly lined up at Ober Olm in April 1945. The fighter idling in the foreground is 'Sweet Janie' (serial and sub-type unknown), assigned to Lt D W Kohn. The next fighter in line is Lt Robert Klopotek's P-51D-20 44-63693 *SNUFFY/The Mad Pole*, whilst the third machine is Capt Jack Warner's P-51D-20 44-63696 *Jackie Marie*. The last identifiable Mustang in this shot is Lt Robert Halferty's P-51K-10 44-12145 *Ol' Bev*, parked alongside Warner's machine (USAAF)



meantime, the 354th continued to strike at the enemy whenever possible. All squadrons flew escort missions for medium bombers on 13 March, and all successfully shot down German aircraft. A total of four victories were scored, with the 355th FS's Maj Lowell Brueland increasing his score to 12.5 (his final wartime tally).

On the morning of 15 March P-51s from the 353rd spotted a bevy of Fw 190s about to bounce a lone P-38. Climbing to head off the attack, the Mustang pilots destroyed two enemy fighters, one of which fell to the guns of Maj Glenn Eagleston - the group's leading ace, his score now stood at 17.5. Later the same day the 356th FS downed two Fw 190s near Fulda.

Twenty-four hours later, Bruce Carr was leading the 353rd FS on a sweep north-west of Limburg when his flight intercepted some 30 Bf 109s. Engaging the German pilots at 16,000 ft, Carr's flight became embroiled in a big dogfight that saw the 353rd claim nine Bf 109s destroyed, with Lt Ivan Hasek seeking credit for 4.5 victories. The Victories Credits Board did not go along with either Hasek or Carr, however, for the former was credited with only two kills while none of Carr's three claims were confirmed.

The 353rd again encountered a formation of fighters on 21 March while on a sweep west of Darmstadt. Fifteen Fw 190s carrying drop tanks were met, and the latter were discarded immediately. These pilots were not aggressive, however, and broke for the deck as quickly as possible. The 353rd claimed to have destroyed six fighters but only three were confirmed, two going to future ace Lt Franklin Rose (these were his second and third victories).



Capt Theo Sedvert of the 353rd FS shot down two Me 262s during the final weeks of the war, even if he did have to use his 0.45-cal service revolver to help despatch one of them! (USAAF)

The classic engagement of the day occurred later that day when Capt Sedvert observed an Me 262 at only 500 ft flying over Osthofen. He dived on the jet just as it dropped a bomb on the town, and good strikes were seen on the fuselage, slowing its speed considerably as it crossed the Rhine River. Sedvert then pulled up astern of his target, only to find that he was out of ammunition. He then drew up alongside the jet and became furious when the German pilot thumbed his nose at him. Sedvert rolled back his canopy and emptied his 0.45 pistol in the direction of his foe with no result. He continued to follow the Me 262 all the way to Wiesental, where he watched it belly in.

The 353rd was back in the thick of things the following day when the group flew a record 19 missions. Fifteen Fw 190s attacked the squadron from above and behind, north-east of Mannheim, and nine German fighters were downed, with Lts Franklin Rose and Calvin Walker getting doubles. Rose had taken his tally of kills from one to five in just 23 hours (these were his last victories of the war).

While the First US Army was already across the Rhine, Gen Patton's Third Army was struggling to get into Germany. However, on the night of 22 March a crossing was at last made, and in an effort to consolidate this breakthrough, the 354th was up before dawn. The group would flying a total of 23 missions that day.

All of the squadrons saw action on the 23rd, and all of them claimed aerial victories. Top scorer for the day was 5.5-kill ace Maj George Max



One of a crop of pilots transferred into the 354th FG in June 1944, Lt Franklin 'Bud' Rose was amongst the last 'Pioneer Mustang Group' fliers to 'make ace'. The 22-year-old scored all five of his kills in March 1945, and aside from the five Fw 190s that he was credited with having destroyed. Rose also claimed two Focke-Wulf fighters that remained unconfirmed. All of his fighters were named *Dream Girl*, and coded 'FT-V (USAAF)



Lamb, who claimed three kills but was only awarded credit for two. He was leading a flight from the 356th FS north-east of Hanau when ground control vectored him after ten Fw 190Ds. Just as the P-51s caught up with the 'bogies' they split-essed, although Lamb latched onto the tail of one of the fighters and scored a series of hits. However, just as he was about to shoot the Focke-Wulf down, he had to break off the engagement and go after another Fw 190 that was on his wingman's tail. The latter pilot subsequently saw his leader's first targeted Fw 190 go in. Lamb reported;

'I had been firing at an E/A on the deck and saw my wingman in trouble. Just as the E/A was doing a wingover to get on his tail, I called a break and zoomed up. The E/A saw me coming and stall-turned into me. We met almost head-on, and I fired a short burst in front of him. There was an explosion and flames and the '190's empennage came off, part of it hitting my windshield,

'My wingman had found another '190 and was having trouble with him. I cut in and closed to about 50-100 yards while in a vertical bank. I fired a short burst after he disappeared under my nose and heard my wingman say "you got that son-of-a bitch". I rolled over and saw the E/A go into the ground.'

New group CO Lt Col Jack Bradley was also involved in one of the missions that day, during which he scored his 15th, and final, victory (a Bf 109) of the war. In all the 334th claimed 17 kills on 23 March.

The following day the Allies carried out Operation *Varsity* — the airborne jump across the Rhine by the US 17th Airborne Division and the British 6th Airborne Division. All Ninth Air Force fighters were up to provide fighter cover for the mission, including the 354th. Nearly 1000 USAAF and RAF fighters escorted the procession of C-46s, C-47s and gliders into Germany.

Lt Col Jack Bradley (with his foot on the chair) prepares to conduct yet another outdoor briefing of the 353rd FS at Ober Olm in April 1945. The group CO's personal P-51D-20 44-63763, named *MARGIE MARU*, can be seen parked in the background (right). Bradley scored his 15th, and last, kill in this machine on 23 March 1945. The aircraft sat opposite (P-51D-20 44-63607) is the mount of 353rd FS CO Maj Glenn Eagleston (USAAF)



Lt Cary Salter of the 353rd FS poses with his P-51D-20 44-63747 *Charlotte's Chariot II* at Herzogenaurach just days after the war had ended in the ETO. His claims for two aircraft confirmed shot down and one damaged are marked forward of the cockpit. Note the squadron badge on the left breast of Salter's A-2 leather flying jacket (Salter)

The following day the group flew 21 missions covering the bridgeheads that the ground troops had established, and it was whilst overflying the Mainz-Worms area that the 353rd, led by Maj Glenn Eagleston, intercepted two Bf 109s. Both fighters were destroyed, with Eagleston duly notching up yet another victory to take his final wartime tally to 18.5. This impressive total made him the the Ninth Air Force's ranking ace.

Despite only one other aerial victory being scored before the end of the month, the group nevertheless continued to inflict considerable damage on rail targets, rolling stock and airfield installations on a daily basis. Low level losses continued to remain high, however, with a number of pilots being shot down by flak during these sorties. Indeed, four men were lost during a dive-bombing mission on the very last day of the month.

During March the group was officially credited with shooting down 45 enemy aircraft, plus the destruction of numerous aircraft on the ground. Flying 242 missions in the month, the 354th also destroyed a record number of ground targets. Eleven pilots were missing in action from these operations.

April found the Allied armies advancing in all sectors against a crippled German army that was forbidden to surrender. Even though desperately short of ammunition, fuel and manpower, the Wehrmacht struggled on. The Luftwaffe, meanwhile, still possessed thousands of aircraft but had no fuel to get them airborne, nor trained pilots to man them.

Fighter sweeps and area cover patrols were the order of the day for the 354th, with the Mustang pilots seeking out anything they could attack in the air or on the ground. On 1 April the only thing sighted aloft was a lone Ju 188 in the Kassel-Erfurt area, and its destruction was shared by Lts Bruce Carr and Fred Canada of the 353rd FS.

The following day Lts Andy Ritchey and Cary Salter, also from the 353rd FS, flew a memorable weather reconnaissance mission. The flight, led by Lt Ritchey, was just passing over the airfield at Erfurt when



One of the last pilots to 'make ace' with the 353rd FS was 1Lt Andrew Ritchey, who scored five victories in two dogfights in April 1945 (USAAF)

two Fw 190s were seen coming in to land. The Mustangs dived from 12,000 ft, firing as they closed, and only one of the German pilots was seen to bail out before both Fw 190s hit the ground just seconds later.

Ritchey and Salter then flew west over Gotha, where they shot down another Fw 190 that they found alone at 3000 ft. Immediately after this encounter the pilots sighted over 90 Bf 109s and Fw 190s flying west in waves of eight at 3000 ft. Most were carrying belly tanks, and they were undoubtedly en route to attack Allied troops on the Rhine. Undaunted by the sheer number of German fighters, Ritchey and Salter set about spoiling the formation, downing a Bf 109 and an Fw 190 in the process, as well as damaging a third aircraft. Andrew Ritchey was subsequently credited with three fighters destroyed, and he would 'make ace' 18 days later.

That afternoon Lt Bruce Carr was leading two flights of Mustangs in the vicinity of Schweinfurt when another large gaggle of Luftwaffe fighters was observed flying at 12,000 ft. The ace wasted no time in wading into the enemy aircraft, and the Mustangs entered the fray with their guns blazing. By the end of the fracas some 15 German fighters had been destroyed, and Lt Carr had downed three Fw 190s and two Bf 109s. The only 354th FG pilot officially recognised as being an 'ace in a day', Carr was also the last pilot in the ETO to achieve this outstanding feat. He stated after the mission;

Lt Bruce Carr went from a pilot awaiting court martial in the 363rd FG to one of the top aces with the 353rd FS, all in the space of one year! He is leaning on the wing of P-51D-20 44-63497, which he used to claim at least 7.5 kills in March-April 1945. This photograph was taken at Herzogenaurach soon after VE-Day (USAAF)





'It was really a piece of cake. They were in two circles when we hit them, and they seemed to sit there while I fired away. Of course there were times during the combat that I had enemy aircraft on my tail while I was attacking, but fortunately they were poor shots.'

Aside from Bruce Carr's five-kill haul, his squadronmate Lt Henry Rudolph claimed two Fw 190s destroyed to 'make ace'.

The 353rd and 355th FSs again encountered German fighters on 4 April, although only on a small scale. The former unit scored two victories while the 355th notched up another four kills.

It was the 356th FS's turn to engage the enemy on the 10th, when the unit intercepted a gaggle of about 25 Bf 109s in the Mulhausen area. The P-51 pilots had to climb to catch them, and once they had been spotted by the Germans, the enemy fighters continued to climb in an attempt to escape, rather than diving for the deck. Nine were downed, with the honours going to Lt Robert Biglow who claimed three.

The following day Capt Earl Bushwood was leading the 356th FS on an evening patrol when he was vectored onto a formation of over 30 Bf 109s, along with a few Fw 190s. Carrying belly tanks, these aircraft were heading west towards the Allied frontline. Bushwood related;

'We were at 10,000 ft when we bounced them. I met them head-on — at my level was one flight of three and another of four. They were flying in our type of formation. Above us at about 1000 ft were two more flights, and above them were three more. I flew head-on through one of the flights and called the squadron to engage. My Blue and Green flights were slightly above and behind. I called them down to help.'

'I took my wingman and started an attack on the flight of three. They started climbing away. One of them was lagging a little and I caught him at 10,000 ft. I fired a short burst which didn't do much. I pulled a little more lead, got good strikes and then closed in and shot his tail and lower fuselage off. He spun in, and the pilot did not get out.'

'While I was attacking, two E/A pulled in behind me. My wingman, Lt Gear, drove them off after destroying the lead ship. I then started

A full view photo of Lt Bruce Carr's final Mustang. The impressive kill tally marked on this aircraft includes not only his 15 confirmed aerial victories, but also his damaged and unconfirmed destroyed/damaged claims (USAAF via Michael O'Leary)

attacking the other two. I pulled deflection on the rear one and immediately got strikes in the engine and wing roots. He was smoking and streaming white coolant. I closed very rapidly, as his engine seemed to stop, and I overran him. This put him on my tail, but I put down my flaps and pulled in really tight, and was closing in again when the pilot bailed out.'

After scoring his second victory Bushwood was attacked by a Mustang, and another P-51 had to chase him off! Despite this near 'own-goal', the 15-minute fight had been most profitable for the 356th, and 17 confirmed victories were recorded. Lt Frank Boron was the top scorer with two and one shared Bf 109s and an Fw 190 all destroyed (he finished his tour with four aerial kills).

14 April was another active day for the group, with the 356th encountering Bf 109s and Fw 190s in the Leipzig area. Capt Richard Asbury and his flight broke up a formation of Bf 109s, which were driven to the deck. Several were downed, including one by Asbury, who also destroyed an Fw 190 that he had bounced whilst it was making passes at an American armoured column. On his second tour in the ETO (he had served for a year with the 363rd FG), Asbury now boasted a tally a 4.5 kills, and he shared in the destruction of an He 111 the following day to give him the all important half-kill that made him an ace.

Returning to the 14th, there was also jet action during the day when five-kill ace Capt Clayton Gross (on his second ETO tour as well) led a flight of 355th FS P-51s along the Elbe River, south of Berlin. Sighting an Me 262 below him at about 2000 ft, Gross dived after the jet but experienced high speed compressibility, which he thought would prevent him from firing on the German fighter. However, after fighting with the controls of his Mustang, he was finally able to pull out of his dive just as the Me 262 passed directly in front of him! Gross later recalled;

Late war Mustang *Lady Baltimore* of the 353rd FS remains unidentified both in respect to its sub-type/serial and its pilot (USAAF)



'The original object of my attention was absolutely dead ahead of me, and I was closing rapidly. My initial burst set its left jetpipe burning, and a fairly large section of his left wingtip flew off, causing me to flinch as it went past me. The speed of my dive caused me to overrun him, and I pulled off to the right and up to lose speed, then rolled back to reposition myself.'

Gross then slotted in behind the Me 262 once again, and the German pilot pulled the aircraft into a vertical climb. The Mustang ace followed him, but he soon felt himself being left behind. However, the jet suddenly stalled and began to slide backwards, tail first. The pilot ejected.

Later that day nine-kill ace Lt Loyd Overfield was leading a 353rd FS patrol in the Riesa area when an Me 262 was sighted below. Diving down, the P-51 pilot caught the jet, which was travelling throttled back towards a nearby airfield, and blasted it with five bursts. The Me 262 exploded and the pilot bailed out. Twenty minutes later, Overfield scored his 11th, and last, kill of the war when he downed an He 111 south-west of Dresden.

A lone He 111 also provided Lt Bruce Carr with his last kill of the war the following afternoon, the triple ace spotting the Heinkel bombing as it was coming in to land at Mensdorff airfield. Nicknamed 'Peck's Bad Boy', Carr, who had come to the 353rd FS to avoid a court martial for being overly aggressive and insubordinate in the then defunct 363rd FG, ended up with 15 confirmed victories, three unconfirmed victories, one probably destroyed, two damaged and 11 aircraft destroyed on the ground.

Maj James Dalglish led the 353rd on a mission to the Dresden area on 16 April which resulted in 13 Fw 190s being downed, these aircraft in the main being clearly flown by inexperienced pilots. High scorer was Lt Warren Jolly with three Fw 190s (boosting his final wartime tally to four kills), while Maj James Dalglish and Lts Fred Fehsenfeld and Joseph Sanchez scored doubles. These final two kills took Dalglish's tally to nine and Sanchez's to four (and one unconfirmed destroyed).

Numerous war prizes were seized by USAAF units as Allied forces pushed further into Occupied Europe, and the 354th FG was no different to most. One of the most popular types was the remarkable Fieseler Fi 156 Storch, which was undoubtedly one of the best-performing light communications types to see service on either side during the war. This particular example was flown into Herzogenaurach by a surrendering German pilot in the final days of the war in the ETO. Here, mechanics from the 354th run up the Fi 156C's 240 hp Argus As 10P inverted-Vee engine after first familiarising themselves with its inner workings. Once painted with 'stars & bars', the Storch proved very popular with the group's pilots (*W Louie*)



Jets were in the news again on 17 April. Capt Jack A Warner of the 356th FS was covering a flight that was strafing in the Karlsbad area when he saw an Me 262 below him at about 1600 ft. He immediately dived on the fighter, and as he approached he noted that the jet was beginning to speed up. However, Warner got within sufficient range to hit the Me 262 in the fuselage, right wing and right jetpipe. After having taken fatal hits the aircraft began to slow, and Warner continued to follow it until it crashed into some trees. Also a two tour veteran, Jack Warner's success on this day took his final tally to five kills exactly.

The 353rd was in action again on 19 April when Fw 190s were encountered in the Weimar area, and six were downed — Lt Kenneth Wise scored two of the kills. Single victories were also claimed on 20 and 22 April.

The 354th took part in some excellent strafing missions against rail targets during this period, as well as attacking enemy aircraft on several of the still existing, but nearly abandoned, airfields. The last aerial encounters came on 26 April, when both the 353rd and 356th FSs met with formations of enemy aircraft. The 356th accounted for six confirmed kills, with Lts Edward Bickford and Walter Crum both being credited with two Fw 190Ds. The 353rd also claimed six confirmed near Charmeng, with Lt John J Hagen accounting for two Fw 190s and Lt Kenneth Wise one (he also claimed a further two destroyed, although these were never officially credited to him).

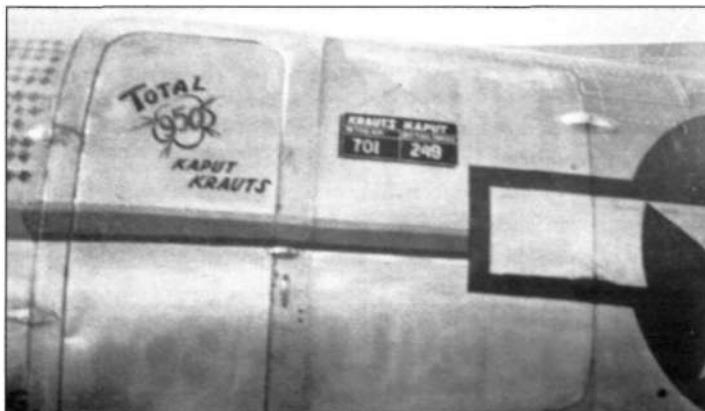
The two Fw 190D kills for Edward Bickford and the solitary Focke-Wulf fighter for Kenneth Wise took their tallies to 5.5 and 5 kills respectively, thus making them the last aces of the 354th FG. Both pilots had only joined the group in December 1944.



A less common type 'souvenired' by the USAAF was the compact Bucker Bü 181 Bestmann, which had been employed by the Luftwaffe (and its Axis satellites) throughout the war as its primary basic trainer. This example features a Hungarian air force cross on its fuselage and a very worn swastika on its tail (W Louie)

Yet another Storch impressed into the ranks of the 354th, this particular example was acquired at Ober Olm soon after the group arrived in Germany. Painted Olive Drab overall, and finished off with the national insignia in its standard positions on the fuselage and wings, this Fi 156C had the additional advantage of an underfuselage drop tank to boost the type's modest 239-mile range (W Louie)





Fighter sweeps continued to be flown up until 4 May, but no further action was seen in the air.

The 'Pioneer Mustang Group', although coming into the North European Theatre late, had set an unbelievable pace. Following the end of World War 2 its total official confirmed victory score stood at 637 aerial kills. In actual fact this figure should be higher, for four XIX Tactical Air Command Victories Credits Reports are missing. It is known that an additional 37 victories belonging to the 354th FG were on those reports, which would bring the total up to 674.

And although the Ninth Air Force did not credit strafing victories to individual pilots, 354th FG reports give the unit an overall tally of 234 aircraft destroyed on the ground. Finally, the group produced 44 aces.

Ground target totals ran into thousands of locomotives, tanks, armoured vehicles and rolling stock destroyed, railway lines cut, bridges blown up and hundreds of military personnel killed. The 354th FG also achieved three important 'firsts' for the USAAF: it possessed the top scoring fighter unit (the 353rd FS), which had more aerial victories than any other army air force fighter squadron in any theatre during the war; it was certainly the most outstanding P-51 group of the war; and can claim the only fighter pilot to be awarded the Medal of Honor in Northern Europe.

To celebrate the end of the war in Europe, the 354th had its assigned C-47 marked up to 'advertise' all its victories, both aerial and strafing. This side view clearly shows the 950 swastika emblems that were meticulously applied by the long-suffering groundcrew. The 'Skyliner' in the 'Pioneer Mustang' titling refers to the civilian name adopted by US airlines for the DC-3 pre-war (USAAF)

This close-up of the C-47's entry doors shows the 354th FG's final totals for World War 2. Both figures were slightly reduced in later years (USAAF)

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

354th FG ACES

Name	Sqn	Score	Name	Sqn	Score
Lt William Y Anderson	353	7	Maj George Max Lamb	356	75
Capt Richard W Asbury	356	5	Capt Charles W Lasko	355	75
Capt Don M Beerbower	353	15.5	Capt Maurice G Long	355	55
Lt Carl G Bickel	353	5.5	Col Kenneth R Martin	HQ	5
Lt Edward E Bickford	356	5.5	Lt Don McDowell	353	85
Lt Col Jack T Bradley	353, HQ	15	Lt Thomas F Miller	356	5.25
Maj Lowell K Brueland	355	12.5	Capt Frank Q O'Connor	356	10.75
Lt Bruce W Carr	353	15	Lt Loyd J Overfield	353	11
Capt Kenneth H Dahlberg	353	14	Lt Robert Reynolds	353	7
Maj James B Dalglish	355, 353	9	Lt Andrew J Ritchey	353	5
Maj Glenn T Eagleston	353	18.5	Capt Felix M Rogers	353	7
Capt Warren S Emerson	355	6	Lt Franklin Rose Jr	353	5
Capt Wallace N Emmer	353	14	Lt Henry S Rudolph	353	5
Capt Harry E Fisk	356	5	Lt Robert L Shoup	356	55
Lt Carl M Frantz	353	11	Lt William J Simmons	355	6
Lt Robert E Goodnight	356	7.25	Maj Robert W Stephens	355, HQ	13
Capt Clayton K Gross	355	6	Maj Gilbert F Talbot	355	5
Lt Charles E Gumm Jr	355	6	Lt Col Richard E Turner	356	11
Lt Ivan S Hasek Jr	353	5	Capt Jack A Warner	356	5
Col James H Howard	356, HQ	8.3*	Lt Robert D Welden	356	6.25
Lt Edward E Hunt	353	6.5	Lt Kenneth Wise	353	5
Lt William B King	355	5.5			
Lt Charles W Koenig	353	6.5			

* includes 3 kills scored with the AVG

APPENDIX 2

354th FG BASES

Hamilton Field, California	25/11/42 to 18/1/43	Gael, France (A-31)	13/8/44 to 18/9/44
Tonopah, Nevada	18/1/43 to 1/3/43	Orconte, France (A-66)	18/9/44 to 13/11/44
Santa Rosa Field, California	1/3/43 to 2/6/43	Perthes, France (A-65)	13/11/44 to 1/12/44
Portland, Oregon	2/6/43 to 10/43	Rosières-en-Haye, France (A-98)	1/12/44 to 8/4/45
Greenham Common, England	2/11/43 to 13/11/43	Ober Olm, Germany (Y-64)	8/4/45 to 30/4/45
Boxted, England	13/11/43 to 17/4/44	Ansbach, Germany (R-45)	30/4/45 to 15/5/45
Lashenden, England	17/4/44 to 22/6/44	Herzogenaurach (R-29)	15/5/45 to end of war
Criqueville, France (A-2)	22/6/44 to 13/8/44		

APPENDIX 3

354th FG GROUP/SQUADRON COMMANDERS

Group Commanders		355th FS	
Col Kenneth R Martin	26/11/42 to 12/2/44	Capt George R Bickell	26/11/42 to 12/4/44
Col James H Howard	12/2/44 to 12/4/44	Capt Robert W Stephens	12/4/44 to 9/44
Col George R Bickell	12/4/44 to 5/45	Maj Maurice G Long	9/44 to 19/10/44
Lt Col Jack T Bradley	5/45 to End of War	Maj Marshall Cloke	19/10/44 to 26/2/45
		Maj Gilbert F Talbot	26/2/45 to End of War
Squadron Commanders		356th FS	
353rd FS		356th FS	
Maj Owen M Seaman	26/11/42 to 26/12/43	Capt Charles C Johnson	17/11/42 to 10/2/43
Capt Richard A Priser	26/12/43 to 25/1/44	Capt Richard D Neece	10/2/43 to 24/5/43
Capt Jack T Bradley	26/1/44 to 30/6/44	Capt James H Howard	24/5/43 to 12/2/44
Capt Don M Beerbower	30/6/44 to 9/8/44	Capt Richard E Turner	12/2/44 to 7/10/44
Capt Wallace N Emmer	9/8/44 to 9/8/44	Maj Robert Brooks	7/10/44 to 20/10/44
Capt Felix M Rogers	9/8/44 to 1/10/44	Maj Frank Q O'Connor	20/10/44 to 7/11/44
Maj Jack T Bradley	1/10/44 to 26/10/44	Maj Earl G Depner	7/11/44 to End of War
Capt Glenn T Eagleston	26/10/44 to End of War		

COLOUR PLATES

1

P-39N-1 42-9162 of the 355th FS, Portland, Oregon, September 1943

The manoeuvrable, yet potentially deadly, Bell P-39 Airacobra taught the young fighter pilots of the 354th FG a lot of hard lessons about flying a frontline 'pursuit' type that in turn held them in good stead when they took the P-51 into combat. The P-39 suffered from aerodynamic stability problems in certain flight regimes due to its centrally-mounted Allison engine, and if flown without due care it had a habit of entering an uncontrollable spin. Indeed, just such an incident claimed the life of the 356th FS's first CO, Pacific War veteran Capt Charles C Johnson.

2

P-51B-1-NA 43-12173/ "Peg O'my Heart" of Maj George R Bickell, CO of the 355th FS, Boxted, December 1943

As CO of the 355th FS, and later as group leader, Bickell led many of the unit's early missions in this Mustang. He had done all his aerial damage by 13 May 1944, which was his 'big day' for he downed two Bf 109s and damaged a third. He was destined never to 'make ace', as his predecessor, Jim Howard, described in his autobiography *Roar of the Tiger*. 'Uncle George' flew a full combat tour, but he was just flat out unlucky in shooting down enemy planes. He always had beautiful camera gun films to show: his guns wouldn't fire or something else, like a missing engine, would force him to abort'. This aircraft wears the early war Olive Drab (OD) and Neutral Gray scheme prior to the introduction of white recognition markings designed to differentiate friend from foe. Unit identity codes were also stencilled in white.

3

P-51B-5-NA 43-6764/Suga' of Capt Charles W Lasko, 355th FS, Boxted, March 1944

Also seen in an early scheme, but with the addition of identification stripes, Suga' survived long enough in the frontline with 7.5-kill ace Lasko for it to later don D-Day stripes, blue checkers on a white nose ring and a Malcolm hood. Lasko almost certainly claimed 3.5 kills with this machine between 13 April and 12 May 1944.

4

P-51B-5-NA 43-6737/ "Peggy II" of 1Lt Gilbert F Talbot, 355th FS, Boxted, March 1944

This aircraft was issued to future five-kill ace Gil Talbot in March 1944. A future CO of the 355th FS, Talbot was stuck on three kills for over ten months, and he finally achieved ace status on 11 April 1945, having claimed his first victory as long ago as 19 February 1944.

5

P-51B-1-NA 43-12437/ MY PET of the 356th FS, Boxted, March 1944

One of the first Mustangs received by the 356th FS in November 1943, this aircraft completed a considerable number of missions in a short space of time and was then declared combat expired in late February 1944 following the arrival of improved P-51B-5s. Most B-1s did not last long in the frontline due to poor build quality and

associated mechanical unreliability. Groundcrewmen Will Louie and Mark Hanson stripped 43-12437 of its OD paint (and guns), and the latter adorned it with a 'Red Ass' emblem below the cockpit. The fighter then briefly served as a squadron 'hack' until written off on 10 March 1944 when it crashed with Lt Mark Tyner at the controls - he was killed outright in the accident. Tyner was 'rat racing' at low level with fellow pilot Lt Charles Simonson at the time. The accident investigation board subsequently discovered that the weary fighter's engine mounting bolts had failed in flight.

6

P-51B-1-NA 43-12451/ LIVE BAIT of 1 Lt Clayton Gross, 355th FS, Boxted, April 1944

This P-51 represents the typical early scheme worn by Mustangs in the ETO. It even retains the 12-inch horizontal white band across the fin and rudder, 18 inches below the fin tip. This feature was found to break up the outline of the P-51's fin, and it was ordered to be removed in March 1944 - no such order was made with respect to the black band applied to silver Mustangs in the same location, however. Initially issued to future five-kill ace 1 Lt Gil Talbot, who christened it "Peggy", 43-12451 was passed on to 1 Lt Clayton Gross when the former took delivery of brand new P-51B-5 43-6737 in March 1944 (see profile 4). By then Talbot had already flown half a dozen fighter sweeps in the original "Peggy" (hence the 'broom' symbols sprayed onto the fuselage forward of the cockpit), and shot down an Me 410 and damaged an 'Me 209'. Gross had the nickname *LIVE BAIT* applied beneath the exhaust stacks on the port side of 43-12451 soon after acquiring the fighter, as well as the name "*GWENDOLYN*" immediately below the cockpit. The sobriquet 'Live Bait' came about when Gross's flightmates suggested that he fly at a lower altitude to them in order to attract the enemy. Gross retorted, 'What do you want, live bait?!' A future six-kill ace, Clayton Gross would duly claim four Bf 109s destroyed (and two more damaged) whilst flying this veteran fighter during his first tour with the 355th FS. A later *LIVE BAIT* was natural-metal P-51D-20 44-63668, also coded 'GQ-1'.

7

P-51B-5-NA 43-6322/ THE VERNA Q of Capt Frank O'Connor, 356th FS, Lashenden, April 1944

Coded 'O' for O'Connor, this long-lived P-51 B was one of the most effective Mustangs ever used by the 356th FS, for its pilot scored a fair proportion of his 10.75 kills (and two probables and three damaged) with it. 'Pinky' O'Connor flew at least three B-model Mustangs marked in this fashion between November 1943 and August 1944, all of which were named after his wife. He received his first D-model (P-51 D-5 44-14016) in the late summer/early autumn of 1944, and he was shot down by flak in this machine on 5 November whilst strafing the airfield at Schwabisch Hall.

8

P-51B-5-NA 43-6315/DING HAO! of Lt Col James Howard, CO of the 354th FG, Lashenden, April 1944

The second *DING HAO!* flown by Jim Howard during his

tour in the ETO, this was not the fighter he used on 11 January 1944 for his Medal of Honor winning feats over Germany, despite it being his assigned machine. Perhaps it was undergoing routine maintenance at the times. As Howard's personal machine, 43-6315 wore the individual letter code 'A' denoting that it was the CO's mount. This aircraft was one of the first Mustangs in the 354th FG to be fitted with a Malcolm hood, which became a highly sought after item amongst P-51 pilots in the ETO. The fighter's nickname, 'Ding Hao', was a Chinese expression of luck that Jim Howard brought with him from his time in the Far East flying with the AVG. The scoreboard which adorned this aircraft is a little misleading, for Howard never actually claimed six Japanese aircraft shot down during his time with the 'Flying Tigers' in 1941-42 - his official victory tally totalled 2.333 destroyed in the air and four on the ground. However, due to pressure exerted by the USAAF's publicity machine following his 11 January 1944 sortie, Howard reluctantly instructed the 356th's unofficial 'artist' S/Sgt Marcus Hanson, to paint six 'rising suns', along with six swastikas, beneath the cockpit of his fighter.

9

P-51B-10-NA 42-106616/GNOME of 2Lt Thomas F Miller, 356th FS, Lashenden, May 1944

Another long-lived Mustang, *GNOME* was used by Tommy Miller to score 4.25 of his 5.25 kills between 20 February and 9 April 1944. He was eventually downed by flak in this machine whilst strafing an airstrip near Chartres on 7 August 1944. One of three pilots from the 356th lost on this mission, Miller spent the rest of the war as a PoW.

10

P-51B-1 -NA 43-12434/SHORT-FUSE SALLEE of Capt Richard Turner, CO of the 356th FS, Lashenden, May 1944

One of the most successful pilot/aircraft combinations within the 354th FG during its first six months in the ETO, Richard Turner claimed eight kills and four damaged in 43-12434 between 5 January and 11 April 1944. The partnership reluctantly ended in May 1944 when *SHORT-FUSE SALLEE* was replaced by a later model P-51B. 43-12434 was in turn passed on to VIII Fighter Command's 359th FG, which was then in the process of converting from Thunderbolts to Mustangs at East Wretham, in Norfolk. Issued to the 369th FS and coded 'IV-R', 43-12434 was christened *Dunkerque* by its new pilot, Lt Charles Staley. A combat veteran who had served with the 359th FG since April 1943, Staley completed his tour with the group in August 1944, having flown 74 missions (300 hours). Unlike Richard Turner, he failed to shoot anything down with 43-12434, although he was credited with having damaged ten enemy aircraft in strafing attacks. Following Staley's return to the US, 43-12434 was re-coded 'IV-P' and passed on to Lt Thomas Bur, who flew it until he received a P-51D.

11

P-51B-1-NA 43-12152/KILLER of Capt Robert W Stephens, CO of the 355th FS, Lashenden, May 1944

Stephens flew at least three B-models, and with the kill markings present on this aircraft, 43-12152 was almost certainly his last 'razor back' Mustang. A number of aces in the ETO preferred the B- to the D-model, claiming that it was a better gun platform and possessed perfectly good visibility once a Malcolm hood had been fitted.

12

P-51B-15-NA 42-106758/Easy Rockin' Mama of Lt James G Burke, 353rd FS, Lashenden, May 1944

Originally assigned to Burke in OD finish, this aircraft was stripped of its paint in the spring of 1944 and flown by its pilot in natural metal for the rest of his tour.

13

P-51 B-5-NA 43-6724/ATLANTA PEACH II of 2Lt William B King, 355th FS, Lashenden, late May 1944

While most pilots changed from OD to 'silver' Mustangs in mid 1944, 5.5-kill ace 'Ben' King went the other way when his P-51B-10 42-106434 was replaced by this machine! He was flying his second *ATLANTA PEACH* when he enjoyed his 'big day' in the ETO over Reims on 25 August, downing three Fw 190s to 'make ace'.

14

P-51 B-5-NA 43-6425/MARGIE MARU of Maj Jack T Bradley, CO of the 353rd FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, June 1944

A long-lived P-51, by the time 43-6425 was salvaged on 8 November 1944, it had destroyed 16 aircraft during the course of 125 missions. Initially issued to Bradley, who named it after his wife, the fighter was used by him to score most of his 15 kills. With 12.666 damaged claims, as well as three probables, Bradley maintained that if he had been a better shot he could have been the ETO's top ace!

15

P-51C-10-NT42-103798/JULIENNE HI of Lt John G Montijo Jr, 353rd FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, June 1944

This P-51 was named in honour of Julianne High School, in California, whose students had raised part of the money to pay for its manufacture. With its painted name, nose ring and invasion stripes, 42-103798 made for a most colourful Mustang.

16

P-51B-7-NA 43-6833/Beantown Banshee of Capt Felix M Rogers, 353rd FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, June 1944

Although *Beantown Banshee* was used by Ken Dahlberg to score his first two kills, the fighter was actually assigned to seven-kill ace Felix 'Mike' Rogers. 43-6833 was Rogers' second *Beantown Banshee*, the first being identically-marked P-51B-1 43-12161. Adorned with full D-Day stripes, the fighter's yellow spinner provides the only unit identity beyond its 'FT' codes - the black nose ring is a vestige of the recognition markings applied to P-51s in the ETO. 43-6833 was a rare P-51B-7-NA, fitted with an extra 75 US gal fuel tank in the fuselage. It was also amongst the first 769 delivered in OD and grey (43-7083 was the first P-51B sent from the factory unpainted).

17

P-51B-1-NA 43-12375/BONNIE "B" II of Capt Donald M 'Buzz' Beerbower, CO of the 353rd FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, early July 1944

Beerbower's second named aircraft was this Malcolm-hooded B-model. Seen here with 15 kill markings, *BONNIE "B" II* boasted full D-Day stripes, the overlap between these being grey. The yellow nose ring has not yet had its triangles applied, which was an omission pre-dating the unit markings adopted after the 353rd's brief P-47 interlude. The white fin and rudder recognition band was

removed following an order dated 23 March 1944, but white wing and tailplane bands were retained, as were the black fin bands applied to natural metal aircraft. Beerbower was shot down by flak whilst flying this machine on 9 August 1944, the ace bailing out too low and either hitting the tail of his fighter and being knocked unconscious or reaching the ground before his parachute had deployed. He was found dead by German soldiers.

18

P-51B-5-NA 43-6877 / *THE STARS LOOK DOWN* of the 355th FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, July 1944

This P-51 received its name in the wake of a one-off flight made on 4 July 1944, when Gen Elwood 'Pete' Quesada used the two-seat aircraft to take Gen Dwight Eisenhower for a ride over the frontline in France. The name was later removed and the war-weary machine became 'GR-B' for Col George Bickell's personal (non-operational) use.

19

P-51B-5-NA 43-6453/Z *HUB* of 1Lt Carl G Bickel, 353rd FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, July 1944

Two of Bickel's 5.5 victories, as well as one probable and one damaged, were scored in this aircraft, which he nicknamed *Z HUB* because it reminded him to be 'heads up'. Passed on to Lt Richard H Brown after Bickel had received a P-51D in early July 1944, 43-6453 was eventually lost when Lt Eldon E Posey ran short of fuel in it during a bomber escort mission to Germany, forcing him to land at Rinkaby, in Sweden. Posey put the fighter down on its undercarriage, and the undamaged P-51 B later served with the Swedish air force, serialled 26001.

20

P-51B-10-NA 42-106602/*SHELLELAGH* of 1Lt Kenneth H Dahlberg, 353rd FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, August 1944

Although he was one of the 353rd's top-scorers, Dahlberg was not allocated a P-51 of his own, and today denies that he ever flew an aircraft named *Dahlberg's Dilemma*, as has been reported in numerous other publications. Aside from *SHELLELAGH*, which was assigned to David B O'Hara (one of three Mustangs he used that were named after the traditional Irish weapon), Dahlberg also flew fellow ace Charles Koenig's P-51D-5 44-13551 *Little Horse* and Felix Rogers' *Beantown Banshee*. This *SHELLELAGH* had originally been delivered in OD finish, and had been stripped to natural metal.

21

P-51D-5-NA 44-13628 / *BONNIE-B III* of 1Lt Carl Bickel, 353rd FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, August 1944

5.5-kill ace Carl Bickel named his P-51D-5 in honour of his late CO, Capt Don Beerbower, whose Mustangs were all called *BONNIE-B*. Having joined the 354th FG in June 1943, Bickel eventually became the 353rd FS's Ops Officer. One of the 354th's first 'bubble top' Mustangs, 44-13628 has partial D-Day stripes, these having been removed from the uppersurfaces of USAAF aircraft in late July 1944.

22

P-51D-5-NA 44-13383 / *Swede's Steed III* of 1Lt William Y Anderson, 353rd FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, August 1944

Anderson named each of his Mustangs *Swede's Steed*, in honour of his country of birth, and this was his final mount

in the ETO - he used it to down three of his seven kills. The eighth cross within the fighter's scoreboard denotes Anderson's V1 kill on 17 June 1944, which was the first flying bomb destroyed by the 354th FG. Soon after this cross had been applied the aircraft was modified with the addition of a dorsal fin fillet. The yellow spinner and nose band, with dark blue triangles superimposed, was an unofficial unit recognition device adopted by the unit as the 354th decamped to France in the wake of the invasion. A prancing horse insignia was applied to the tail in orange.

23

P-51D-5-NA 44-13948/*ARSONS REWARD* of Maj Wallace N Emmer, 353rd FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, August 1944

Before he received *ARSONS REWARD* in mid June 1944, Emmer had flown a 'lemon' of a P-51B named *Peaceful Penguin* (coded 'FT-G', but serial unknown). This aircraft had been destroyed when its oxygen system exploded and the fighter then caught fire during routine servicing at Lashenden in late May - despite being a 'lemon', the P-51 B had still been used by Emmer to claim six German fighters destroyed in April-May!. *Peaceful Penguin*'s fiery fate duly inspired the unique name for Emmer's brand new P-51 D-5, which was one of the first of its type issued to the 354th FG. He enjoyed great success with the new Mustang, scoring five victories with it prior to 44-13948 being shot down by a direct flak hit near Rouen on 8 August. Emmer succeeded in bailing out of his blazing fighter, but not before he had suffered grievous burns. Hospitalised for many months, he eventually succumbed to respiratory complications (myocarditis) as a result of his wounds on 15 February 1945 whilst still in captivity.

24

P-51D-5-NA 44-13551/*Little Horse* of 1Lt Charles W Koenig, 353rd FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, August 1944

Koenig almost certainly scored three of his 6.5 kills (plus a probable and a damaged) in this aircraft - Ken Dahlberg also occasionally flew it, but failed to claim any victories. Soon after arriving in France, Koenig changed the name of the aircraft to '*Le Petit Cheval*', which the locals really appreciated.

25

P-51D-20-NA 44-63711/*KILLER!* of Maj Robert W Stephens, CO of the 355th FS, Gael (A-31), France, August 1944

The last of three Mustangs used by Stephens that bore the name *KILLER!*, 44-63711 was the only D-model to carry this apt inscription - he scored his final three victories with it in late August, raising his overall tally to 13 kills.

26

P-51 D-20-NA 44-63702/ "*Grim Reaper*" of Capt Lowell K Brueland, 355th FS, Criqueville (A-2), France, August 1944

Brueland christened most of his P-51s *WEE SPECK*, yet inexplicably changed the name of this particular aircraft to "*Grim Reaper*" for a short while. He flew 44-63702 both before and after his spell on leave in the US in August-September 1944- see profile 43 for an example of the markings it wore on VE-Day. This machine clearly shows how the 355th FS replaced the white spinner and nose ring on its Mustangs with a blue or white spinner forward of a blue and white checkered nose ring during the summer of 1944.

27

P-51D-20-NT 44-13151/SHANTY IRISHMAN of Capt Francis P McIntire Jr, 356th FS, Gael (A-31), France, September 1944

The smiling Irishman downed a Bf 109 and shared in the destruction of a second fighter in this P-51 in September, having previously claimed three Messerschmitts west of Reims on 25 August flying 'AJ-D' (serial unknown).

McIntire then had to switch to the P-47 just when things were going good for him, and he never did 'make ace'.

28

P-51D-5-NA 44-14010/CHICAGO'S OWN of Lt Frederick J Warner, 356th FS, Gael (A-31), France, September 1944

Although credited with two aerial kills, Fred Warner claimed neither of them in 44-14010 (his assigned P-51D). Two of the four victory markings on this aircraft were for strafing kills - many 354th FG pilots had ground kill victory symbols painted onto their aircraft even though the Ninth Air Force did not recognise them.

29

P-51D-5-NA 44-13581/The Prodigal Son of Lt Bartholomew C Tenore, 356th FS, Orconte (A-66) France, October 1944

Like Francis McIntire, Bart Tenore also destroyed a trio of Bf 109s (and damaged a fourth) on the legendary 25 August 1944 clash - he was flying this Mustang at the time. Claiming one more aerial victory, and two strafing kills, Tenore was on his second combat tour by this late stage of the war. Having survived two spells in the ETO, Bart Tenore lost his life in a post-war flying accident. 44-13581 was shot down on 21 November 1944 whilst being flown by another pilot.

30

P-51D-5-NA 44-13693 / Angels' Playmate of 2Lt Bruce W Carr, 353rd FS, Orconte (A-66) France, October 1944

Carr was transferred to the 353rd FS from the 380th FS/363rd FG while facing a court martial for insubordination. He had caused problems with his over-aggressiveness in the air (by claiming his unit's first aerial kill) and rebelliousness on the ground (he reacted badly to his CO labelling him over-aggressive!). These qualities were recognised as being potentially useful by Glenn Eagleston, who arranged for Carr's transfer to the 353rd. The young pilot repaid the favour by claiming a further 14 confirmed aerial victories, three more unconfirmed and 11 strafing kills. This aircraft was Carr's first assigned P-51 D, and it featured dark blue triangles on its yellow nose ring - the marking used by the 353rd before it traded its Mustangs for Thunderbolts. These triangles were duly replaced by a simple yellow ring and spinner after the squadron regained P-51s. Following a short spell flying P-47Ds, Carr received P-51D-20 44-63497 in March 1945, and its appearance was almost identical to this machine, but with a plain yellow nose.

31

P-47D-28 44-20272 of 1Lt Loyd Overfield, 353rd FS, Rosières-en-Haye (A-98), France, December 1944

Loyd Overfield apparently adorned this aircraft with the name *Big Jake* on its port side, but as no photographs of this artwork have yet come to light, we opted for this rather plain starboard view. It is likely that the popular black

winged skull and crossbones also appeared on the port side, as this became something of an unofficial 353rd FS badge during the unit's P-47 period.

32

P-47D-30 44-20473 of Maj Glenn Eagleston, CO of the 353rd FS, Rosières-en-Haye (A-98), France, December 1944

Eagleston's personal P-47D has been well illustrated in the years since the war, partly because its cowling marking is so distinctive. The adoption of such a motif surely must have occurred to the dedicated P-51 pilots of the 353rd, who needed something to lift their spirits during their brief flirtation with the Thunderbolt. Like many squadron pilots, Eagleston merely 'changed the frame' for his kills during his time on the P-47, as he did not add to his score until after Mustangs had been restored to the 354th FG.

33

P-47D-30 44-20514/ Wee Speck of Capt Lowell K Brueland, 355th FS, Rosières-en-Haye (A-98), France, December 1944

'Brue' Brueland enjoyed all of his World War 2 air combat success on the P-51. Despite scoring few aerial kills with the Republic fighter, the 354th FG sported some of the most flamboyant schemes ever seen in the ETO during its 'Thunderbolt winter'. Presented with an extensive 'canvas', some pilots enthusiastically reproduced their P-51 kills, and favoured names, because few anticipated their beloved Mustangs being returned. Adding two MiG-15 kills over Korea, Brueland's final score reached 14.5 victories.

34

P-47D-28 42-28750/LIVE BAIT of Capt Clayton K Gross, 355th FS, Rosières-en-Haye (A-98), France, December 1944

Another strikingly marked 355th FS machine, Clayton Gross's P-47D was also painted up with his exclusively Mustang kills - note the grinning bomb motif, which adorned a number of P-47s within this unit at the time. Astutely, Gross went on leave to the French Riviera for some of the time that the 'Pioneers' were 'sweating out' the P-47s foisted on them by higher authority. Returning to a P-51 cockpit (and claiming an Me 262 destroyed on 14 April 1945), Gross was almost shot down - by P-47s! He completed two tours and was credited with six victories.

35

P-47D-28 42-28790/UNADILLA KILLA of Lt Russell H Kline, 355th FS, Rosières-en-Haye (A-98), France, December 1944

Kline chose his hometown of Unadilla, New York, as the name for his aircraft. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Kline's sole victory was claimed in a Thunderbolt (over an Fw 190) on 18 December 1944, although he was not flying this aircraft at the time.

36

P-47D-30 44-32760/ "SHORTY" MIRIAM of Lt Norman Davis, 356th FS, Rosières-en-Haye (A-98), France, December 1944

One of the 356th FS's most colourful Thunderbolts, "SHORTY" MIRIAM was named after the wife of its pilot, Lt Norman E 'Ned' Davis. He completed 74 missions during his ETO tour, many of which were flown in this aircraft.

37

P-47D-28 42-29336 of Capt Kenneth H Dahlberg, 353rd FS, Rosières-en-Haye (A-98), France, December 1944

In contrast to some 354th FG pilots. Ken Dahlberg took to the P-47 well enough to score three kills (all Bf 109s, with a fourth example unconfirmed destroyed and a fifth damaged) in this very aeroplane on 19 December 1944 while flying a ground attack mission. Dahlberg was shot down by flak in 42-29336 on St Valentine's Day 1945. The 14-kill ace saw out the rest of the war as a PoW.

38

P-51D-5-NA 44-13882/UNO-WHO? of Maj George 'Max' Lamb, 356th FS, Rosières-en-Haye (A-98), France, March 1945

Credited with 7.5 P-51 kills. Lamb flew a series of Mustangs named *UNO-WHO?* from December 1943 through to war's end. Aside from a brief spell with the P-47-equipped 405th FG, Lamb saw all of his combat flying with the 354th FG. His penultimate P-51D, 44-13882 featured the red spinner and nose band introduced after the unit had transitioned back onto Mustangs in February-March 1945. Lamb claimed two Fw 190s destroyed and one unconfirmed destroyed in this machine on 23 March 1945 - one of the confirmed destroyed and the unconfirmed kill were over Fw 190 'long-noses'.

39

P-51D-20-NA 44-63763/MARGIE MARU of Lt Col Jack T Bradley, 354th FG HQ, Rosières-en-Haye (A-98), France, April 1945

Bradley's mount for much of his second tour in the ETO, 44-63763 was used by the ace to destroy a Bf 109 on 25 March 1945, which was his sole victory during his second spell with the 354th.

40

P-51D-20-NA 44-63607 of Lt Col Glenn T Eagleston, CO of the 353rd FS, Rosières-en-Haye (A-98), France, April 1945

Ranking ace of the Ninth Air Force, Eagleston used a succession of similarly marked P-51 B/Ds, the first of which was called *Feeble Eagle*. This aircraft was his last assigned Mustang, and he claimed two kills with it in March 1945.

41

P-51D-15-NA 44-15622/ "SHORT-FUSE" of Lt Col Richard Turner, 356th FS, Ober Olm (Y-64) Germany, April 1945

After leaving the 354th FG in October 1944, Turner returned to the group again in April 1945, rejoining his old unit, the 356th FS. His fighter in the final weeks of war in the ETO was 44-15622, which he had painted up as "SHORT-FUSE" minus the *SALLEE*, since relations with the young lady in question had mellowed! Following its P-47 phase, the unit had adopted new colours for its P-51s in the form of a red spinner and nose ring in place of the blue star-spangled nose ring and white (or blue) spinner.

42

P-51D-20-NA 44-63696/ Jackie Marie of Capt Jack A Warner, 356th FS, Ansbach (R-45), Germany, May 1945

Warner scored two kills and one damaged (all Bf 109s) in this P-51 on 11 April 1945. Six days later he downed an Me 262 (not in this fighter) to 'make ace'.

43

P-51D-20-NA 44-63702/ WEE SPECK of Maj Lowell K Brueland, 355th FS, Ansbach (R-45), Germany, May 1945

As previously mentioned, Brueland flew several *WEE SPECKs*, with this machine being the last one. An extraordinarily long-lived Mustang, 44-63702 had also been painted as "Grim Reaper" (see profile 26), having entered service when issued to Brueland as long ago as August 1944. The ace's final seven claims were all made with this machine, Brueland being credited with a Bf 109 destroyed (and one unconfirmed probable) on 13 March, followed by a Messerschmitt fighter unconfirmed destroyed and four more unconfirmed probably destroyed ten days later.

44

Fieseler Fi 156C Storch of the 354th FG, Ansbach (R-45), Germany, May 1945

Found in the final days of the war and made airworthy, this liaison and reconnaissance aircraft was one of several Luftwaffe types the 354th's pilots learned to fly and enjoy.

UNIT HERALDRY

354th Fighter Group

It is not known who designed the 354th FG crest, which takes the form of a shield emblazoned with three wide stripes of red, blue and yellow - the latter were meant to represent the three squadrons within the group. However, when they commenced combat operations the units instead employed red, blue and white for squadron identification purposes. Yet, by war's end, the original colours had indeed been adopted - yellow for the 353rd, blue for the 355th and red for the 356th. The red mustang on the upper right of the shield denotes that the 354th was the 'Pioneer Mustang Group'. Over the shield is the American eagle atop a crown representing Great Britain and the Cross of Lorraine representing France, from whence the group's operations were carried out. Finally, the crossed swords behind the shield confirm that the 354th was a unit of warriors, and the scroll below the shield spells out the group's motto, 'Valour in Combat'.

353rd Fighter Squadron

The unit took its insignia and name ('Flying Cobras') from its first fighter type, the P-39 Airacobra. The 353rd fulfilled its image as a squadron 'coiled and ready to strike' by becoming the top-scoring unit in the entire USAAF during World War 2.

355th Fighter Squadron

This unit, initially under the command of future group CO, Capt George Bickell, adopted the name 'The Pugnacious Pups'. The men of the 355th viewed themselves as 'young and tough', embodied with the bulldog spirit depicted in their insignia (complete with wings, flying helmet and goggles).

356th Fighter Squadron

Christened the 'Red Ass' squadron, the 356th's insignia bore, appropriately, a red ass! This motif was created by George Handley, who painted a number of the artworks featured on the unit's aircraft in the ETO. The animal not only depicted a rowdy, energetic subject, but the term 'Red Ass' also related to the unhappy morale of typical servicemen.

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354th Fighter Group



I think the success of the 354th as the leading group in the European theatre for aerial victories is due to several things. First was the initial training of the squadrons before deployment to England. Colonel Ken Martin nurtured the group from its infancy, and all the excellence that later showed through could be placed at his doorstep. Despite his youth, he knew how to foster teamwork and demand perfection in flying. There was nothing more important than getting the group off on the right foot. Second, our pilots were taught to fly

mutual support, and practised it faithfully. There were no "hot" pilots in the 354th, only "excellent" pilots. Third, men like Glenn Eagleston gave advice and warnings about combat tactics and guarding one's tail. This prepared our pilots for lurking dangers, something the other groups may not have done.'

**Brigadier General James Howard,
Commanding Officer of the 354th Fighter Group**

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